

Grief and School

When a child or teen is grieving, they may need extra attention when it comes to performing the tasks required in a school setting: focusing for long periods of time, regulating impulses and emotions, sitting for long periods of time without breaks, and following routines and rules.

Immediately after a loss you might observe:

- The child may seem overly happy—enjoying the extra attention, sees self as “special.”
- Attention span and ability to focus may increase or decrease.
- Difficulty learning and applying new information. This is due to the child primarily operating from the “emotional” part of the brain.
- Mood swings, not wanting to be away from parents, more withdrawn.
- Difficulty with impulse control. May be more physically active or seem “hyper.”

During the first TWO years after a loss, you might also observe:

- A change in academic performance over time. Often the child will return to previous levels of performance, given support and time.
- Decreased interest in school performance in general.
- Mood swings may be less extreme, but still affect ability to perform.
- Externalized feelings through acting out behaviors, hyperactivity, and increased emotionality, especially if the child doesn’t have a constructive outlet for expressing his or her grief.
- Unsatisfactory performance on day-to-day tasks, e.g. homework, but continued satisfactory performance on tests.

How You Can Help

A school day is full of complicated performance standards and activities: sitting still, organization, standing in line, getting along with others, knowing when to talk and when not to talk, meeting deadlines, and on and on. This can be very stressful for any child, much less a child who is occupied with the tasks of grieving. One of the best things a teacher can do is to accommodate a grieving child by:

- Acknowledging that grief is a lifelong process. School performance may be a challenge for a grieving child for **years** after a loss.
- Be aware of anniversaries and other trigger dates, e.g. the holidays. You might see “grief spasms” during this period. Also, increased times of stress, such as during CSAPs or finals, can reactivate an intense grief response.
- An important task of child and teen development is identifying emotions, learning how to talk about them, and how to express them in socially appropriate ways. When a grieving child is displaying a high level of emotionality, they are probably not attempting to get inappropriate attention, disrupt the class, or get out of doing work; often it is simply a matter of not yet having the life experience or tools to modulate the complicated physical and emotional aspects of grief.

As a person who spends a lot of time with the child, you play an essential role in their grief process. Your presence and compassion are what will be valued the most. Having respect for that child's individual needs and providing support such as classroom accommodations, helping the family identify community resources, or providing a kind ear to listen will have long-lasting results.

It is important to remember that if a child demonstrated adequate school performance before a loss, know that they will eventually return to this performance level once they have negotiated some of the complex tasks of grieving.

If you think a child or teen may need some extra support, encourage them to contact Grief Services at 303.604.5300 or grief@hospicecareonline.org to learn about ongoing, age-appropriate grief support groups. We also provide consultation and trainings for teachers and other professionals.

© 2006 HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties.

