

Mini-Articles: Grief Triggers

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Supporting Grieving Children: What to Know About Grief Triggers

Grief triggers are sudden reminders of a person who has died. They elicit powerful emotional responses in grieving children. They are especially common in the first few months after a death, but may occur at any time.

Here are three helpful things to know.

1. Grief triggers can be intense and unsettling for students. The sudden reminder and strong reaction are unexpected. The student hasn't prepared for the flood of powerful emotions that occurs. Students may feel frightened or out of control. They may think they are losing ground after starting to feel some relief from their grief. Their reactions—perhaps tears, anger or a need to escape—may embarrass them.

2. Informed school professionals can support students who experience grief triggers. It helps to explain ahead of time that such reactions may occur. Let students know that, while intense, the immediate experience will pass.

Collaborate with the student to develop a plan for grief triggers. This often includes identifying a safe place the student can go (library, nurse's office, counseling office, study hall). Work out a special signal that doesn't draw the attention of the entire class but does allow the student to go to that safe space when necessary. You might invite the student to call a family member or arrange support from a counselor or school nurse.

3. You can anticipate some likely triggers and take steps to minimize them. Triggers often occur around holidays or anniversaries (Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, anniversary of the death). Reach out to grieving students at these times.

Introduce activities or discussions in ways that acknowledge absences and offer alternatives. For a Father's Day activity, invite students to focus on their father or another important male adult in their lives. For discussions about serious illness, violence or accidental death, recognize that students may have lost family members or close friends in these ways.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

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Support Grieving Students: Use These 7 Steps to Respond to Grief Triggers

Grief triggers following a loss are sudden reminders about the person who has died. They elicit powerful emotional responses in grieving children. They are especially common in the first few months after a death, but may occur at any time.

Common triggers include such things as hearing a song or watching a TV show, seeing a picture of a place, a smell or sound, special occasions, offhand comments by peers or even a news report about someone who died in a similar fashion.

Children experiencing a grief trigger may respond in many ways. There may be an outburst of anger or sadness, intense crying or feelings of being out of control. They may be unable to concentrate or feel a need to escape a situation. They may feel embarrassed that they can't manage their emotions.

Here are seven ways education professionals can anticipate, respond to and minimize triggers for grieving children.

1. Speak to grieving children ahead of time about these incidents if possible. Tell them they are fairly common, can be quite intense, and do pass.
2. Identify a safe space or location the student can go. This might be the library, a study hall, the counselor's or nurse's office, or some other place at the school.
3. Identify an adult the student can talk to when feeling upset or wishing to talk.
4. Come up with a plan that allows the student to discretely leave the classroom or to request and obtain support that doesn't draw attention. This might be a low-key signal (a wave of the hand, a trip to the tissue box). Otherwise, students may hesitate to seek permission to leave the classroom or to ask for help. It's difficult to expose their vulnerabilities in front of peers, especially if they are already feeling overwhelmed.
5. Allow the student to call a parent or family member if he or she feels it would help.
6. Encourage the student to speak with a school counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker.
7. Offer the student a chance to talk with you privately about feelings, questions or other concerns.

When students know these types of plans are in place, they feel less trapped when triggers do occur. This helps children remain in class and be more available for learning.

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Support Grieving Children: Frame Lessons in Ways That Minimize Grief Triggers

Grief triggers are sudden reminders of a person who has died. They elicit powerful emotional responses in grieving children. They are especially common in the first few months after a death, but may occur at any time.

Virtually every classroom includes children who have experienced the death of a parent, other family member or close friend. Teachers can’t possibly know everything that has happened in the lives of their students. Yet bringing this understanding to the way they plan and introduce lessons can offer valuable support to grieving children.

It can also minimize grief triggers by preparing students ahead of time for what’s coming and offering some options.

Here’s how one teacher explained it:

I did a lesson on St. Valentine’s Day having students write a letter to a parent to say, “Thank you.” And then I learned that some of our kids don’t live with their parents for whatever reason—either they’re passed away or they’re just not around.

I had to learn about my students outside of school. That made me re-edit my curriculum. Not take it out, but address it differently in terms of family being whoever is next to you, whoever takes care of you at that time.

Teachers can introduce family-focused activities with choices for students (e.g., cards for Mother’s Day, bookmarks for Father’s Day, describing a tradition for Thanksgiving). For example, a teacher might say, “If your father is no longer alive or doesn’t live with you currently, you can still focus on your father or select another important male in your life—someone who cares for you and has given you support.” Or, “I’d like you to describe a Thanksgiving tradition in your own family, or one you’ve heard or read about in other families, that you believe brings families closer together.”

Teachers can also present emotion-based writing activities (e.g., write about a sad day, a happy event, something that scared you) with different options. “It doesn’t need to be the saddest day ever, just a day that was sad.” “If you don’t want to write about a sad day, write about another day that was important to you.”

Teachers can also openly acknowledge students’ range of experience. For example, when starting on subjects addressing serious illness, war, or accidental or violent death, mention that some students in class may have had family members or friends who died in this way. Encourage everyone in class to speak thoughtfully about the topic. Avoid putting any students on the spot in the discussion.

Steps such as these can help students remain emotionally present in class and be more available for learning.

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create [grievingstudents.org](#), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America’s classrooms.