



# When an Elementary School Student Experiences a Death

## *A Guide for Teachers*

### **Prepare**

Prepare the class for the student's return. Share only details that are public knowledge (less is more). This can help lessen the amount of questions after the student returns.

### **Opportunity to ask Questions or Share**

Give an opportunity for the class to ask questions. Remember it is okay to answer with "I don't know" - even adults don't always have the answers and it is okay to say that. Ask the class if anyone else has experienced a death. Ask what they wanted. Remind students that everyone is different, some people may want space, some people may want to talk about it, some people may seem okay, and some may visibly get sad during class.

### **All feelings are okay**

Remind students that your classroom is a safe place for all feelings, that all feelings are okay, and that the student who experienced a death may have a lot of different emotions all at once. They might be glad to see their friends (this doesn't mean they aren't sad), they may be really sad, or they may be mad when other student's mention their person who died. All those feelings are okay and we don't take it personally - it is all a part of grief.

Finally, remind students that the student will still want to be included and invited to social events. They may say no or they may attend. Reminding students that grief comes in waves - with good days and not so good days.

### **Concrete conversation starters for kids:**

"I'm sorry your dad died. I'm here if you ever want to talk about him."

"It's okay to cry around me."

"How are you doing today? Do you feel like coming over after school?"

### **A few things not to say:**

"At least you have another brother."

"I know how you feel, my dog died." Remind students that everyone's grief is different so we don't actually know how someone feels.

"You shouldn't be laughing your Dad died."

"Why are you making your Mom a Mother's Day card, she died?!"

### **Support upon returning back to school**

It is helpful to meet with the student individually and/or with parent(s) to find out what is important to them, what are their fears for returning, etc. When you know the student's wishes, you are better able to support them and help their transition back to school, ease their fears, and make their school year easier.

Some children appreciate the attention from peers and teachers and want to talk about it openly. Others may be upset about the attention. School may be the only place where they can be "normal," especially if their home environment has significantly changed. Respect the child's wishes. Be available to them as they need. ***Personality impacts each student's needs in their grief. Every student is different.***

Keep an eye on any personality or behavior changes, many of these signs are normal to healthy grief, however the child may need special assistance especially in a school setting. Grief can affect memory, concentration, energy, patience, friendships, etc.

Grief can appear to intensify 6-8 months after the death. You may see emotions intensify around this time, be available to the student as they need.

Just knowing that your teacher cares and hasn't forgotten about their loved one can be very helpful and healing. Don't avoid talking about it. Be careful not to single out a student in front of the class, but to take them aside at times when the class is distracted.

### **Helpful talking starters for teachers to students**

Hey, I was just thinking about your \_\_\_\_\_...

Can you tell me about a funny memory?

Is there anything in school that reminds you of \_\_\_\_\_? (helping the student identify triggers and come up with a coping plan supporting the child during the school day).

### **About A Haven**

Our Mission is to partner with grieving families by providing support, outreach to the community, education, and hope. We help children grieve through a family centered approach.

When grief is present, it touches every area of a child's life. We want all children to have support where and when they need it, and are proud to provide support groups to children where they spend a large portion of time - their schools.

**What A Haven can offer your school:**

- In-school grief groups for students
- Child-grief consultation with staff: school wide or with individual teacher/counselor.
- Teaching sheets for teachers and staff to utilize in the weeks following the death incident
- Hosting on-site (at our office, away from the boundaries of the workplace) debrief sessions for teachers and staff who may be particularly impacted
- Consultation about longer term support if needed in the months following the death

**In-school grief groups:** We partner with local schools to provide a 6-8 week grief group

- School decides what time works best for them during school hours
- A Haven designs and leads group (each school has the option to provide a co-facilitator if a staff member is interested in participating)
- A Haven provides information about grieving children to the school and to each student's family to ensure consistency of support

**Caring for YOU:**

Remember that it is okay for your student body to see that the adults around them are also impacted by this loss. Model healthy grieving to students by allowing staff members to focus on taking care of themselves with healthy coping strategies.

Sometimes a death occurs that impacts an entire school community. We appreciate how difficult it can be for staff to support grieving students when they are also actively grieving. Teachers and staff may be triggered by the school setting, and it may be helpful to host debriefings or supportive sessions at a separate location. A Haven is available as an alternate setting.

A Haven staff are available to consult with you about how to best support your staff so that they are cared for and equipped to support the student body.

Our staff is also able to fill the role of normalizing and educating students about grief so that grieving teachers and staff do not feel overburdened.

**You are not in this alone.** We are here as a resource to you, your team, and your community.

Please contact us for more information, let us know how we can best support you.

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[www.ahaven.org](http://www.ahaven.org)

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