

About Students' Death-Related Grief & Bereavement

Note: Otto Dreier, an undergraduate working with our Center at UCLA, indicated a personal interest in how schools address students seen as experiencing grief and wanted to look at what the literature had to say. The following briefly highlights material from his research paper (with some edits).

Grief, mourning for something or someone lost, can take many forms in one's life. In today's culture, many broaden the definition of grief to include non-death loss. While well-intentioned, this can lead to a diluted understanding of the more significant death-related grief encounters that haunt many individuals. The focus in what follows is on death as a natural human experience and the impact of death related grief on students.

Stages of Grief and Coping

The basic stages of grief: *denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance* were laid out by Elisabeth Kubler Ross in 1969. Research indicates that this framework provides a sense of the general feelings one can *expect* to experience during grieving; at the same time, in no particular order, a person can take years to move from one stage to the next, or go through all the different stages in the same day, (Cruse, 2025). Understanding the flexibility and fluctuation around the stages remains crucial to understanding the experience of children coping with loss.

Children's Grief: Different from Adults?

All or most adults have experienced some form of grief related to the passing of a loved one. As one grows up, the reality and proximity of the death of loved ones intensifies. Different individuals process and cope with resulting emotions in a variety of ways, but it's commonplace for such feelings to disorient and confuse most children. The loss of a loved one has the power to profoundly alter a child's view of the world and their identity. This can even happen with adolescents and young adults who lack a complete understanding of the finality of death and this a reality at some point for all life.

Losing a Family Member

In responding to death of a family member, many adults display considerable stability and independence. Most children on the other hand have strongly relied upon their family members for support, and when a parent or other family member passes away, they react in ways that reflect their immaturity and limited coping capacity. Anger is common reaction.

"The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Often a child will show anger towards surviving family members" (American Academy of Children & Adolescent Psychiatry (2023).

Of course, age does not necessarily predict how someone will react. Often coping with the death of a loved one matures a child beyond their natural development, and regulation of emotions naturally improves with age (Silvers et. al., 2014). Nevertheless, as Perry and Rubenstein (2025) stress, while most adults possess the experience necessary to cope with traumatic loss, children usually do not. As a result, acute mental health crises can arise.

The material in this document was produced by Otto Dreier as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Otto Stresses that Grief is Personal, but Happens in a Societal Context

Often due to a lack of education and awareness, people perceive grief negatively and attempt to box it up and hide it or just ignore it altogether. Our society has adopted a consumer mindset towards emotions. In the same way we throw out goods deemed inferior, we seek to throw out emotions we view as undesirable. A result: many who face grief, especially children, wrongly feel shame about grief and suffocate their emotions. By changing our collective attitude about grief to understand it as normal, many will feel more open and comfortable sharing their stories and will carry the accompanying feelings as natural responses rather than as shameful.

In a TED talk, Carly Woythaler-Runestad (2015) highlights that “grief is a natural human experience, not a problem we’re trying to fix.” While seldom discussed, one-in-20 children in the U.S. experience the death of a parent or sibling before the age of 18. The problem that needs fixing is that the scope of all this increases stigma and isolation of bereaved children. She also indicates that many teachers encounter children who are grieving, and yet there is little-to-no teacher education on how to accommodate or help such children.

Adeline Woltkamp (2019), a teenager who lost her father to cancer during her senior year of high school, relates her experience with grief in a TED talk. She states she “quickly learned what really mattered, and realized what didn’t. ... This big change in my life really put things into perspective for me.” Her experience underscored that the daily worries of students (such as getting higher grades, more likes, trendier clothes, the latest gossip, college admission), don’t matter as much to grieving students as they do to those not coping with such a loss. When the loss is accompanied by a temporary drop in school performance, this may be due to the emotional upset, or it may represent a shift in one’s priorities that eventually can enhance longer-term well-being. Everyone copes with grief differently, and often those who face such traumatic events at a young age do come to a new realization of their values and priorities. Peer support groups can help with this by enabling children to connect with others to share and learn from shared experiences and appreciate they are not alone in grieving.

Grief presents an incredible challenge to children. They often compartmentalize their feelings and may have difficulty keeping their negative emotions out of their performance and interpersonal relationships. The way students grieve is a function of their stage of development and learning, and the potentially for learning, behavior, and emotional problems is a concern.

In general, school systems not only fail to educate us about concrete and real life issues that are deeper and more personal to the human condition than arithmetic and reading comprehension, they fail to support grieving youngsters. Schools need to correct all this with relevant policies, practices, and new attitudes.

Endless possibility and opportunity await such changes. I personally envision and believe in a world in which those affected by the death of a loved one, especially children, feel as comfortable, accepted, welcomed, and understood by those around them as anyone who does not share their experiences.

Therapeutic Intervention

Those who struggle with grief do not need to go it alone, and most likely should not. Quite commonly, one’s well-intentioned peers or friends try to offer help or solutions, which too often lead to frustration and annoyance on everyone’s part.

Formal therapeutic interventions discussed in the literature include use of active coping strategies, imagery, role-playing, meditation, yoga, and grief counseling or therapy. “Counseling involves helping people facilitate uncomplicated, or

normal, grief to a healthy adaptation to the tasks of mourning within a reasonable time frame” (Worden, 2010). Grief therapy involves more specialized techniques for complicated, prolonged, and exaggerated grief reactions (e.g., individuals who are nonaccepting and experiencing long-term emotions that interfere with their ability to cope).

Gupta, (2024) report finding that many benefit from grief counseling or therapy that allows individuals a safe and judgement-free space to open up about and process their feelings (e.g., “it was good to have unhelpful thinking patterns challenged, like those related to guilt or anger”). Generally speaking, traditional talk therapy is reported to lead to fewer symptoms in the long run, more ease opening up, and the validation of one’s feelings. However, Weisz and colleagues (2018) caution that therapeutic interventions have been found less helpful reducing children’s “depressive” symptoms, and research is needed to find proper therapy techniques for those experiencing grief and other reactions to death.

How Can a School help?

Death, grief, and bereavement are natural aspects of the human experience that can be barriers to learning and teaching. Because of this, schools must play a role in addressing the problem (see Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2000; 2023). All students can benefit from high levels of support from, teachers, student/learning support staff, and peers.

Some have argued that schools should prepare teachers to proactively intervene, rather than just reacting. Dimery and Templeton (2021) state that such professional preparation can make teachers more empathetic and understanding of grieving students and enhance teacher confidence and efficacy in supporting them.

In addition, the topics of death, grief, and bereavement can be included in health education and other relevant courses. This not only would improve literacy and acknowledgment about the matters, but could help counter related negative stigma.

Peer counseling and other forms of appropriate peer support also can be productive (Nami, 2025). Peer supports can foster a sense of belonging and act as a protective barrier against negative experiences at school. Such peer interactions also can embellish the school’s role in facilitating an empathic and supportive school climate.

A Note from the Center Co-directors

Schools must prevent and ameliorate many types of learning, behavior, and emotional problems each day. Fortunately, the ways in which such problems overlap means that similar strategies and interventions can be used for a variety of problems, rather than approaching each as a separate entity (Adelman & Taylor, 2017).

Given this and based on many years of research and development, our Center stresses embedding interventions for problems, such as grief and bereavement, into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system (Adelman & Taylor, 2022).

For more on the topic grief, see the Center’s online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Grief and Bereavement* https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3003_01.htm

References Used in Preparing this Resource

- Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2017). *Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide*. Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
- Adelman & Taylor, 2022 (2022). *A brief guide for moving in new directions*. Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>
- Alioto, A. G. (2020). *Grief, Loss, and Bereavement Fact Sheet #5: Evidence-Based Treatments for Grief*. Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network. <https://www.jber.jb.mil/Portals/144/Services-Resources/Resiliency-Resources/PDF/SelfCareTipSheets/Grief.pdf>
- American Academy of Children & Adolescent Psychiatry (2023). *Grief and children*. Author online. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-A-and-Grief-008.aspx
- American Psychological Association. (2022). *Grief*. Author online <https://www.apa.org/topics/grief>
- Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports (2000). *Grief and loss*. Author at UCLA. <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/grief.pdf>
- Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports (2000). *Addressing Grief through Death Education*. Author at UCLA. <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Bereave.pdf>
- Child Bereavement UK (2017). *When a parent has died: Young people share their experiences* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-qFkRaPRYY>
- Cruse Bereavement Support (2025.). *Understanding the five stages of grief*. Author online. https://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/child_loss.htm
- Dyregrov, K., Endsjø, M., Idsøe, T., & Dyregrov, A. (2014). Suggestions for the ideal follow-up for bereaved students as seen by school personnel. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 20, 289–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2014.955676>
- Gupta, S. (2024). *What is grief counseling?* <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-grief-counseling-5189153>
- Human Rights Watch (n.d.). *The difference between youth and adults*. Author online. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/us1005/6.htm>
- Mitchell, W. J. (2021). Developmental differences in affective representation between prefrontal and subcortical structures. *PubMed Central*, 17(3). <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsab093>
- Nami (2025). *Peer support resources*. Author online <https://www.nami.org/your-journey/frontline-professionals/public-safety-professionals/peer-support-resources/>
- Perry, B., & Rubenstein, J. (2025). *The child's loss: Death, grief, and mourning*. Scholastic. https://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/child_loss.htm
- Silvers, J.A. (2014). Age-related differences in emotional reactivity, regulation, and rejection sensitivity in adolescence. *PubMed Central*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028297>
- Sutton, J. (2018). *10 grief counseling therapy techniques & interventions*. Author online. <https://positivepsychology.com/>
- Weisz, J. R., & Kazdin, A. E. (2018). The present and future of evidence-based psychotherapies for children and adolescents. In J. R. Weisz & A. E. Kazdin (Eds.), *Evidence-based psychotherapies for children and adolescents* (3rd ed., pp. 577–595). The Guilford Press.
- Woltkamp, A. (2019). *Requiem - Coping with the loss of a parent* Youtube Video. https://www.ted.com/talks/adeline_woltkamp_requiem_coping_with_the_loss_of_a_parent
- Worden, J. W. (2010). *Grief counselling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. Routledge. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1583919414/>
- Woythaler-Runestad, C. (2015). *No child should ever grieve alone* Youtube Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YR9eokO8cFA>