

Brief Information on Childhood Traumatic Grief for School Personnel

This information sheet summarizes material found in the “In-Depth General Information Guide to Childhood Traumatic Grief” and “In-Depth Information on Childhood Traumatic Grief for School Personnel,” available at www.NCTSN.net.

Childhood traumatic grief is a condition that some children develop after the death of a close friend or family member. Children who develop childhood traumatic grief reactions experience the cause of that death as horrifying or terrifying, whether the death was unexpected or due to natural causes. Even if the manner of death is not objectively sudden, shocking, or frightening to others, children who perceive the death this way may develop childhood traumatic grief.

For some children and adolescents, responses to traumatic events can have a profound effect on the way they see themselves and their world. They may experience important and long-lasting changes in their ability to trust others, their sense of personal safety, their effectiveness in navigating life challenges, and their belief that there is justice or fairness in life.

It's important to keep in mind that many children who encounter a shocking or horrific death of another person will recover naturally and not develop ongoing difficulties, while other children may experience such difficulties. Every child is different in his or her reactions to a traumatic loss.

Identifying Traumatic Grief in Students

Children at different developmental levels may react differently to a loved one's traumatic death. But there are some common signs and symptoms of traumatic grief that children might show at school. Teachers may observe the following in the student:

- Being overly preoccupied with how the loved one died
- Reliving or re-enacting the traumatic death through play, activities, and/or artwork
- Showing signs of emotional and/or behavioral distress when reminded of the loss
- Attempting to avoid physical reminders of the traumatic death, such as activities, places, or people related to the death
- Withdrawing from important aspects of their environment
- Showing signs of emotional constriction or “numbing”
- Being excessively jumpy or being easily startled
- Showing signs of a lack of purpose and meaning to one's life

How School Personnel Can Help a Student with Traumatic Grief

Inform others and coordinate services

Inform school administration and school counselors/psychologists about your concerns regarding the student. Your school district or state may have specific policies or laws about dealing with emotional issues with children. If you feel a student could benefit from the help of a mental health professional, work within your school's guidelines and with your administration to suggest a referral.

Answer a child's questions

Let the child know that you are available to talk about the death if he or she wants to. When talking to these children, accept their feelings (even anger), listen carefully, and remind them that it's normal to experience emotional and behavioral difficulties following the death of a loved one. Do not force a child to talk about the death if he or she doesn't want to. This may be more harmful than helpful for the child.

Create a supportive school environment

Maintain normal school routines as much as possible. A child with traumatic grief can feel life is chaotic and out of his or her control. It's beneficial for the child to have a predictable class schedule and format. The child may also need extra reassurance and explanation if there is a change. Staff should look for opportunities to help classmates who are struggling with how best to help and understand a student with traumatic grief.

Raise the awareness of school staff and personnel

Teachers and school staff may misinterpret changes in children's behaviors and school performance when they are experiencing childhood traumatic grief. Although it is always a priority to protect and respect a child's privacy, whenever possible it may be helpful to work with school staff who have contact with the child to make sure they know that the child has suffered a loss and may be experiencing difficulties or changes in school performance as a result. In this way, the school staff can work together to ensure that children get the support and understanding they need.

Modify teaching strategies

Balance normal school expectations with flexibility. You might avoid or postpone large tests or projects that require extensive energy and concentration for a while following the death. Be sensitive when the student is experiencing difficult times—for example, on the anniversary of a death—so that you can be supportive and perhaps rearrange or modify class assignments or work. Use teaching strategies that promote concentration, retention, and recall and that increase a sense of predictability, control, and performance.

Support families

Build a relationship of trust with the student's family. On the personal level, be reliable, friendly, consistently caring, and predictable in your actions. Keep your word, and never betray the family's trust. It can be helpful for the school or district to designate a liaison who can coordinate the relationship among the teacher, principal, guidance counselor, other appropriate school personnel, the family, and the child.

Make referrals

Consider referral to a mental health professional. Traumatic grief can be very difficult to resolve, and professional help is often needed. If possible, the student and his/her family should be referred to a professional who has considerable experience working with children and adolescents and with the issues of grief and trauma.

For more information

Additional information about childhood traumatic grief and where to turn for help is available from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at (310) 235-2633 and (919) 682-1552 or at www.NCTSNet.org.