

How To Help The Grieving Student

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When a child or adolescent permanently loses a family member or friend, their world falls apart. Life seems horribly unfair and they often feel that they will be swallowed by the emptiness within. Most, if not all, children and teens take for granted that the people they care about are going to be around forever and that everything will always turn out fine.

When a student suffers a permanent loss, the primary teacher or counselor should be contacted and informed as to how the student wants his/her information disclosed to others. After-all permanent loss is a private and personal matter and public disclosure often generates an overwhelming response which is more often than not, difficult to cope with.

“Special Notes” boxes and messages located in a general office area, for the student, are helpful and much less intrusive ways to show support during this difficult time.

Taking into consideration that everyone is different, there are several common behaviors that can be expected when a student is grieving. The grieving **Elementary School** student may experience regression to earlier stages of development, fighting, anger withdrawal, decreased concentration and sleepiness. The grieving **Middle School** student may be argumentative, experiment with risk taking (substance use, sexual acting out, stealing), experience unpredictable mood swings and present with an increase in physical concerns including illness and body aches. Finally, the grieving **High School** student may withdraw from parents and other adults, push the limits of previously imposed rules, evidence sadness or crying, exhibit abrupt changes in hygiene and/or experience an increase in risk taking (substance use, reckless driving, sexual acting out).

As primary sources of support, parents, caregivers, teachers and counselors must be prepared to let students know that they are cared for. Teachers and counselors should be encouraged to establish and provide a supportive environment where the student can *share*. Teachers should also be flexible and willing to work with students around academic workloads and extra-curricular activities. Parents, caregivers and school personnel should expect and accept mood swings while reinforcing the need for respect. In addition, adults should avoid power struggles when possible, encourage time for physical outlets and assist students with plans for completion of school related assignments.

For more information as to how to best support the grieving student or to schedule a bereavement assessment for a grieving student, contact the Hospice of Washington County Bereavement Department.