

The Grieving Child

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The grieving child is the most vulnerable student in the classroom. They are often misunderstood, which leads to eventual neglect. Consequently, many children feel abandoned and helpless in improving their circumstances and dealing with their feelings. This may lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity and maybe eventual suicidal or homicidal feelings and actions. It is important for teachers to acknowledge students' feelings of grief and loss and to help them deal with their feelings. A child's grief is very real and they need to have assistance in finding constructive ways to work out their grief.

Grief is an overwhelming feeling of sadness resulting from trauma. There are many traumas that do not involve death, such as abuse, parents' divorce or unemployment, multiple moves, imprisonment of a family member, and family alcohol and drug involvement. These are but a few of the many grief issues with which today's boys and girls must deal. (Goldman, 2000) This definition of *grief* shows us that grief issues are occurring in the lives of many students in the same classroom. This exposes the need in today's society to address grief and loss in the classroom. Even if it does not reveal itself, grief is a part of every child's life at one point or another. Providing students with the tools to cope with grief and loss will prove to be a great asset at many points during their lives.

Classroom teachers have the privilege of being included in the lives of their students. They have access to information that is essential in assessing where the student is coming from and how they are feeling. Often times this information can help us to recognize the student's grief. It is important to address these feelings of grief and seek out the school counselor to assist the child with this process.

The school counselor will be able to assist the student in the grief process through listening, offering suggestions about how to deal with grief, and other avenues if necessary. There may be peer-counseling groups that the school counselor can help the student become involved with. They will also have some ideas for the classroom teacher with helping the student in the classroom.

The first step for the classroom teacher is to acknowledge the student's grief. This should be done at a private moment and can be as simple as recognizing the loss and offering themselves to the child if need be. This may be the first time the student has had someone acknowledge their grief and it can be a very emotional time for them.

It is important for teachers to create a warm and safe classroom environment so students will feel comfortable sharing their feelings and needs with the teacher. If this occurs, students will feel confident that the teacher cares about their feelings. As a result, students will be confident in confiding their feelings in the teacher.

There will be many opportunities for the classroom teacher to assist the student in addressing their grief. Simple writing and drawing assignments can be modified for the grieving student in order for them to remember the person they have lost. They may want to write about a time when they were with the person, how they remember the person, or what the person meant to them. In art, they will have the opportunity to draw the person, or something they did with the person. The student may have an idea of their own they would like to remember through writing or drawing. The more flexible a teacher can be in this process, the more therapeutic the assignment will be for the grieving student. They may also want to share their project with the class and tell about the loss of their loved one. This can be done during a "show and tell" time, so that other

students will have a chance to reflect on their feelings and maybe share an experience or feeling of their own.

The teacher should consult the student's parent(s) and discuss what needs to be done to help the student at school. It is important for the teacher to remember that the parent(s) will most likely be grieving themselves and may have a difficult time discussing the grief of their child, or even understanding their child's grief. The teacher may want the school counselor present when she talks with the student's parent(s) to help the process go more smoothly and offer suggestions for helping the student at home.

In the event that a student does not share their feelings so openly and the teacher has little knowledge of what is happening in the student's life it may be difficult to recognize the student is grieving. Some children will be withdrawn while others will display symptoms of attention deficit disorder (ADD). Classroom teachers must be careful not to rush to conclusions about a student's actions.

A classroom teacher can reach the grieving child many ways and it is imperative that we are aware of each student's obstacles. In this way, we will be best equipped to help each student achieve success in the classroom and life. Teaching is not just about information, it also involves teaching children how to cope with life's pressures and obstacles. Teachers should use this awareness to find the "teachable moments" in daily events that occur in the classroom, school, city, state, country, nation, and world. These lessons will leave students forever changed and better equipped to deal with grief and loss.

Grief that is left unacknowledged leads to long-term problems. It prevents the child from receiving the treatment and care that they need to recover from their loss. It is

never appropriate to allow children to work through grief on their own. They need assistance from everyone involved in their life in order to appropriately address and ultimately resolve their feelings. Family and friends provide a necessary bridge between the child and the person they have lost by sharing pictures and memories of the loved one that the child will cherish.

One recent study of American children reveals that as many as one in five have problems with learning, behavior, or emotions stemming from the effects of their physical and emotional environments before and after birth. (Diamond and Hopson, 1998) This is a significant number of students, in every classroom in America, that will require some type of grief or loss assistance. It should be our goal as classroom teachers to meet the needs of all these students. These problems, when not resolved, will lead to violence.

Consider this chilling statement from Robert Acremant, a twenty-seven-year-old man charged with the murders of a lesbian couple in Medford, Oregon, in December, 1995. When a newspaper reporter asked him what he liked about murdering people, Acremant replied, "It's not a 'like' feeling. It's maybe a little relieving. It's interesting. It's no different than shooting your chicken that just lost in a cockfight, or putting your sick dog to sleep, or shooting at a tin can. I really haven't cared about people my whole life." (Diamond, et al., 1998)

We can only speculate about the abuse, neglect, or trauma this man must have experienced in his life, but we can be pretty sure that he did not receive any help in dealing with his grief.

The grandmother of Aaron McKinney, the Wyoming College student who tortured a fellow student with the help of his friends, has this to say about her grandson's childhood, "Aaron should have had help but it never happened." stated by Ruth Proctor (Pastor: McKinney Reflecting on Crime, Billings Gazette, 10/26/00) As a boy, Aaron experienced the divorce of his parents. At age 15, his mother died. The lack of grief intervention in this young mans life lead to the murder of an innocent man. He felt so devalued as a young adult that he placed that same value on another human life.

Children need to be taught right from wrong by a number of people in their lives and one of those people is their teacher. Teachers have a responsibility to their students and to society to provide children with a well-rounded education and this cannot occur without addressing grief and loss issues with them. They need to know how to cope and where they can turn for help.

We live in a fallen world that is surrounded with grief and loss. There is not a "sensitive period" when it comes to grief. It is all around us. Children are more impacted than adults because for them it comes out of nowhere and no matter what they try, it does not go away. They are not able to see that their grief is affecting their life. They need an adult to help them understand what grief is and how unresolved grief can cause them to be unhappy.

After studying grief as it relates to children, I feel like there is an overwhelming need for grief education in our schools. I cannot think of one city or school that is not affected by grief in a given school year. We need to spend time with children validating their feelings and helping them work through them.

Since children do not understand grief, and if no one talks with them about it, they are fearful in revealing their feelings resulting from it. If teachers address grief in an up front, open, and honest fashion students will be better equipped to recognize their grief and seek help to work through it. Grief education is necessary in every classroom in America. I cannot think of any better way to address violence, then to start with the grief that it causes to those who are affected by it.

## References

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