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2003

# Supporting grieving students in schools

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## Recommended Citation

Bartholomew, Erin E., "Supporting grieving students in schools" (2003). *Graduate Research Papers*. 310.  
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/310>

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# Supporting grieving students in schools

## **Abstract**

It is estimated that one out of six children will lose a parent by eighteen (Dutton, 1999). Ninety percent of junior and seniors in high school have experienced loss associated with death, forty percent the death of a friend, and twenty percent have witnessed a death (Dutton, 1999). Children and adolescents are exposed to grief, but they are not equipped to handle the grief process. This paper discusses the many experiences children and adolescents go through when dealing with a loss. It discusses how these experiences are different than that of adults and why it is so important to acknowledge the grieving child or adolescent. It focuses on the school counselors' role to educate staff on the grieving process in order to help the school community become a safe and supportive environment for the grieving student. It also focuses on how it is important for school counselors' to employ a multicultural perspective in the area of death and grief and how this aspect can impact how one works with a grieving client.

**SUPPORTING GRIEVING STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS**

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**A Research Paper**

**Presented to**

**The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education  
University of Northern Iowa**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**

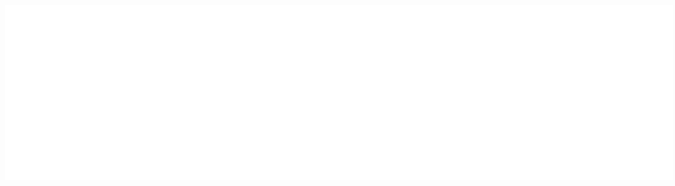
**of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education**

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**by**

**Erin E. Bartholomew**

**December 2003**



This Research Paper by: Erin E. Bartholomew

Entitled: SUPPORTING GRIEVING STUDENTS

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

10/23/03  
Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

10/23/03  
Date Received

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Abstract

It is estimated that one out of six children will lose a parent by eighteen (Dutton, 1999). Ninety percent of junior and seniors in high school have experienced loss associated with death, forty percent death of a friend and twenty percent witnessed a death (Dutton, 1999). Children and adolescents are exposed to grief, but they are not equipped to handle the grief process. This paper discusses the many experiences children and adolescents go through when dealing with a loss. It discusses how these experiences are different than that of adults and why it is so important to acknowledge the grieving child or adolescent. It focuses on the school counselors' role to educate staff on the grieving process in order to help the school community become a safe and supportive environment for the grieving student. It also focuses on how it is important for school counselors' to employ a multicultural perspective in the area of death and grief and how this aspect can impact how one works with a grieving client.

## Supporting Grieving Students

Grief is the emotional response process that follows an important loss (Dutton, 1999). This emotional process is a normal and natural response, and a universal human experience. The term grief describes the ups and downs, the adaptations to change, and the numerous small negotiations bringing to a new dimension of life (Demmer, 1999).

Millions of children and adolescents are directly affected by grief every year. One out of every six children will lose a parent by the age of eighteen (Dutton, 1999). It is estimated that ninety percent of juniors and seniors in high school have experienced loss associated with death. Forty percent of this ninety have lost a friend to death and twenty percent have witnessed a death (Dutton, 1999). Even with these high percentages of children experiencing grief, too often their grief is not acknowledged. This has left many children and adolescents to find their own devices to overcome feelings of sadness, guilt, confusion, anger, and loneliness.

This manuscript is divided into four parts. The first part describes the different experiences of the grieving child and adolescent, the second part describes the cultural aspects of grief, the third part discusses how to integrate the grief process into the school, and the fourth part describes different interventions one can use with students in the classroom, individually, and with small groups.

### *Experiences of the Grieving Child and Adolescent*

#### *Stages of grief*

There are many stages of grief. However, there is not a specific time frame for each stage nor is there a specific order of progression for the stages. According to

Rosemond there are five stages of grief. *Shock* and *denial* is usually the first stage.

During this stage children and adolescents are very confused. It is hard for them to understand and believe that their love one has died (Rosemond, 1997).

*Intense sadness* is the second stage. During this stage children and adolescents go in and out of feelings of sadness (Rosemond, 1997). They may have times where they seem okay, and the next minute they are crying and very sad. Fatigue is often associated with this stage because the feelings of sadness are so intense (Rosemond, 1997).

Following sadness is the stage of *anger*. Children and adolescents often try to find fault for the death in something or someone, perhaps even the deceased (Rosemond, 1997).

They are often moody, have little patience, and try to push others away. Even though children and adolescents say that want to be alone during this stage, it is important to be there for them. This is definitely a time they will need a sympathetic ear and someone to talk to and express their feelings too (Hospice, 1999).

*Guilt* usually follows close with feeling of anger. Children and adolescents will sometimes blame themselves for the death of a loved one. They think back to things that happened, months or years ago, that upset the deceased person. This is a time when children and adolescents need help acknowledging their feelings and letting go of the guilt (Hospice, 1999). They need help realizing that they did not play a role in the death of their loved one. *Acceptance* is the last stage and is a time when one has fully realized the death of someone close to them. They begin to relate to the dead person in the past tense and can speak openly and readily about them to other people (Rosemond, 1997).

Once again, it is important to remember that these stages do not happen in a certain time frame or order. The stages of grief are different and unique for every individual. A child

or adolescent might have been experiencing the guilt stage of grief and regress back to the anger stage. It all depends on that individual and the relationship they had with the deceased.

### *Children and Adolescent Grief is Different*

Many adults have myths about how children and adolescents grieve. Many myths are due to lack of knowledge of how children and adolescents grieve. Many adults feel that children and adolescents are too young to understand, and are lucky because they will not remember the death of someone close to them. Therefore, they will be able to heal quickly. Many children do not know how to express their feelings verbally; they keep them bottled up inside and express them in such ways as acting out. Both children and adolescents often suppress their emotions because they are concerned about upsetting their parents' (Demmer, 1999). They also do not always feel they have permission to talk about their grief. In reality, children and adolescents experience a multitude of feelings including fear, anxiety, guilt, confusion, sadness, isolation, and loneliness. The grief of a child and adolescent is a highly individualized, cognitive, and dependent on the emotional process (Demmer, 1999). However, this grief is not always acknowledged by adults, and often discredited. When loss happens to children and adolescents, adults need to step forward and offer support, set an example, and provide guidance in helping them move successfully through the grief experience.

During the grief process a child needs help understanding that death is *universal* (Morgan, 2002). All things will live and die, and it is no one's fault. They must understand that the deceased person no longer feels anything because a dead body is no



longer functioning like it used to (Morgan, 2002). Finally, they must understand that death is not reversible, it is permanent.

Children should be allowed to *grieve*. A child or adolescent who has experienced the death of a loved one, will experience just as much pain as an adult. They will have feelings of anger, guilt, sadness, confusion, and so on. They need to be given permission to express these emotions and to grieve.

The child or adolescent needs to be able to commemorate the *deceased*. They need to remember the good things as well as the bad to grieve the actual person who is gone. They should be allowed to play some role in deciding how the deceased will be remembered (Morgan, 2002). This shows them that once again, they have permission to grieve and remember.

When the child or adolescent has moved through the grieving process, and are ready to go back to the normalcy of their lives, simply go on (Hospice, 1999). It is usually enough for the child or adolescent to know that their special someone was a part of their lives.

### *Cultural Aspects of Grief*

#### *Acknowledge diversity*

Schools in the United States today are very diverse. Students represent many different cultures and backgrounds. No longer do our students and parents represent Eurocentric values, but many subscribe to the values from third world cultures (Despeider & Schockland, 1999, p. 1). Acknowledging this diversity in schools is important because many school counselors as well as teachers and staff do not have the knowledge of the different customs, traditions, and spiritual beliefs that students from

multicultural backgrounds use to cope with challenges such as grief. Gaining knowledge, awareness, and skills about the different cultural and spiritual identities is necessary to work with a multicultural population appropriately and effectively. Individual and family beliefs are often strong and powerful determinants of a students' interpretations of the grieving process. Therefore these beliefs need to be respected and handled with sensitivity when dealing with students' who are grieving. D'Andrea (p. 236) stated there was three steps school counselors or anyone working with a multicultural population need to take before working with them. First, one must be aware of the biases and assumptions that determine and affect their interactions with a multicultural population. This helps them think about their current knowledge about the population and what limitations or advantages they have because of the amount of knowledge they have. Next, one must assess the worldviews, beliefs, values, and behaviors of the population they are working with and how these affect their meaning of life. After steps one and two are completed, the counselor is in a better position to reach step three which is to build a rapport with their client. Building a rapport will allow the counselor to have a greater level of understanding and respect to their client's cultural and spiritual beliefs. Their relationship will in turn allow the counselor to assist the client appropriately and effectively.

#### *Eight factors to consider*

Along with the steps above, when working with multicultural children and adolescents who are experiencing grief, Tramonte (1996) states the following are important aspects that should be considered. Communication, some cultures express grief silently while other are more expressive. For example, Japanese are more comfortable

with silence than Americans (Tramonte, 1996). This is important to consider because if someone is not showing emotion, we often assume they are fine while they really could be hurting. Culture also affects the conversational topics as appropriate or inappropriate.

The concept of family is important to consider when working with students. In an average white family, members often live far away and are not as close with extended family members, while among African Americans and Hispanics, the family including extended family often live close together and are very close. This impacts the support one will have during and after the death of a loved one. White Americans do not always have the support that African Americans and Hispanics have. Another aspect of family is how to involve children and adolescents into the grieving process. Some cultures shield their children and adolescents from contact with death where as others are very open (Tramonte, 1996). Americans are very hesitant to encourage children to attend or participate in the mourning rituals whereas Native American children attend wakes and funeral from an early childhood onward (Tramonte, 1996).

Religious beliefs are the fourth factor. These give people meaning for life and death. Religion often answers the following life's ultimate questions: "Where are we? Why are we here? What does it all mean? What are we supposed to do?" (Tramonte, 1996).

Clients' attitudes towards death are something to take into consideration. For some cultures death of a loved one is a time of celebration. African Americans view death as a celebration of life, life has been lived and the earthly journey completed. Hindus view death as a time where one will either go to heaven or hell depending on how they lived their life (Irish, 1993). It is important to take into account the bereavement,

grief, and mourning practices of the clients' culture. For Native Americans, cutting their hair, cutting or scratching their forearms, tearing clothing, and wearing black are common and appropriate outward displays of grief (Irish, 1993).

Funeral practices are the last factor. No matter what the cultural background or beliefs are, the funeral meets the religious, social, and psychological needs of the mourners. It offers support for those that are mourning, attempts to deal with the grief, and brings meaning to the life of the deceased individual (Tramonte, 1996).

When working with culturally diverse clients, it is important to remember that each culture has its own frame of reference for what it believes about death as well as how to deal with it (Tramonte, 1996). It is also important to be aware of biases and assumptions one has of the culture they are working with.

### *Integrating the Grief Process Into the School*

#### *Educating Staff*

Grief in children and adolescents is normal and necessary. It is important for adults to be available to support the needs of grieving children and adolescents. Children and some adolescents have not had the experiences that allow them to fully understand what they are going through. It is the adults job to help them move through the grief process in a healthy manner (Hospice, 1999). It is the schools' responsibility to be prepared to deal with the immediate and long-range need of students' whom have been impacted by the death of a loved one (Davidson, & Doka, 1999). Research shows that children who have been allowed to openly express their emotions and grieve the death with a trusted adult are less likely to suffer the effects of depression, low self-esteem, psychosomatic illnesses, drug-use, suicidal thoughts, excessive risk-taking, and guilty

feelings (Hospice, 1999). Having a school with a safe and supportive environment that honors feelings, is one in which a majority of children and adolescents have the capability to find inner strength (McGlauffin, 1998). In order for a school to gain this type of supportive environment, the entire schools awareness and understanding of the uniqueness, and duration of the grief process must be raised (McGlauffin, 1998).

Building this awareness is often the school counselors' responsibility. School counselors must prepare the school community to deal with immediate and long-range needs of students impacted by loss (Davidson & Doka, 1999). To do this they must first educate school staff including, administrators, teachers, cooks, janitors, bus drivers, and so on, about the impact grief can have on students' physical, emotional, and behavioral development. Educators must understand that children and adolescents react to death in varying ways. Some students may act out due to anger or guilt, some may withdraw, and others may become the class clown (Hospice, 1997).

Along with educating staff on how grief can affect children and adolescents developmentally, it is also important to educate them on how to openly communicate with students about death and the grief process. As children grow and begin to understand more, they ask more questions. This may be painful for adults' as they have to go back over the loss in new ways (Davidson & Doka, 1999). They may also be fearful of saying the wrong thing. However, the best thing an adult can do is to listen to the child or adolescent. Don't push them to talk. They will open up when they are emotionally ready and as their personalities dictate (Hospice, 1997). Allow them to talk and cry, listen to their concerns and fears. When they are asking questions try not to shy away from terms such as dead, buried, suicide, cremate, or buried. It is best that they

hear these terms from someone they trust and that will explain what the words mean so they will understand them (Hospice, 1997).

Many times a school-aged child who has experienced a death of a significant person exhibits behaviors similar to Attention Deficit Disorder. These behaviors may include: daydreaming, trouble completing assignments, inability to concentrate, procrastination, difficulty following directions, restlessness, inability to form or maintain friendships, and impulsive, risk-taking behaviors (Hospice, 1999). An explanation for grieving children exhibiting these behaviors is that grieving takes energy. The child may require more sleep. A mind that is preoccupied with a loved one who has died is being drained of its ability to concentrate (Hospice, 1999). A child who is angry about a death, may act out their emotions by procrastinating or engaging in risk-taking behaviors. Dr. William Worden, a leading authority on children's grief, has found that this stage of disorganization and attention deficit can last as long as two years after the death (Hospice, 1999).

*Setting up a positive environment.*

It is important to respect those who are grieving. Feelings of grief can be very overwhelming and often can lead to disorientation. Respecting students' time of confusion, silly mistakes, and allowing them to show emotion is important.

Speaking to students about the death and keeping communication open allows to students to grieve. Many times students will come back to school and no one acknowledges the student for being gone nor for the reason of their absence. This often sends a message to the student that it is bad to talk about the death, and they should keep it to themselves (McGlaufflin, 1998). All one would need to say is "I am sad to hear you

grandfather died, I am here if you need anything.” This statement might not lead to a response by the student but the loss would be acknowledged and the student would know that, that person cares (McGlaufflin, 1998).

Being honest with students about a death is important. Adults should share what they know about a death as well as what they cannot share and why (McGlaufflin, 1998). Being honest with students once again shows them that the school staff respects them.

Do not be afraid to show emotion. Talking about death can often be painful, and is not considered a comfortable time. However, showing emotion models to students positive and successful grieving (McGlaufflin, 1998).

It is important to never forget a loss. Death of a loved one is an event that everyone carries for life. Mentioning that you know this is an important time for someone who has lost someone in the past. This validates what the griever is facing and once again lets them know that someone cares (McGlaufflin, 1998).

Support one another. As has been stated earlier in this paper, helping a grieving student, can often take a toll on the person working with them. It is important that he or she has someone they can talk to. This also helps to create a place of warmth, safety, and community in the school.

### *Interventions*

#### *Interventions for the classroom*

It has been said that the American culture is fixated on hurrying the healing process of grieving. There is no time spent on grieving, mourning, talking about the pain, feeling it, memorializing it, remembering it (Miller, 2000). The following are interventions educators can use in their classroom to help students work through the

grieving process. If a student in the class has experienced a loss, have the class make sympathy cards for that student. If a student has died, send the sympathy cards to the family. Decorate the student's desk or locker for a brief period to help make the loss real for the other students in the school (Hospice, 1999).

Read books about death to the class. Have students then write their own stories or poems of their own grief or that of others. Have children make puppets and put on a play about the characters in the book. Have them express their own thoughts and feelings through the puppets (Hospice, 1999).

Have students create a memorial such as a planting tree or painting a mural. Conduct a ceremony or some other activity in honor of the deceased. It is important to allow the students to plan and execute these events as much as possible (Hospice, 1999).

Have a guest speaker come speak to students in the classroom. A grief counselor from a hospice, hospital social worker, or a funeral director would be potential speakers. The Cedar Valley Hospice provides a program called Katie and Quincy Koala for the community. Katie and Quincy Koala visit children in the hospital, at home, or at school. When they come into the school they help explain to teachers and classmates what is happening to their friend. Katie and Quincy bring art materials and storybooks to help children talk openly about their feelings. The overall purpose of the koala visit is to help children feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts, fears, and emotions with the important adults in their lives.

Have students plant small gardens in the classroom. Have them feel and smell the dirt and flowers and discuss the cycle of life for plants, animals, and all living things



(Hospice, 1999). Hold a grief education week and have centers with activities including art projects, plays, writing, and so on.

Morgan suggests for schools to provide a “safe room” (p. 63). He feels students need to take a “time-out” from the everyday pressures of life. This safe room offers upset or anxious students a place to talk about feelings, or to just have a quiet place to sit and relax. The safe room may provide soft music or nature sounds such as the ocean, rain, or wind in the woods. Listening to this music will help soothe the student and they may be able to talk about what is troubling them. This “safe room” may be found in the school counselor’s office or the nurse’s office.

#### *Individual interventions*

Because grief impacts everyone so differently, it is important for school counselors to meet with students who are grieving on an individual basis. Once again it is important to consider the students’ culture and the way they process grieving before working with them. The following are some examples of appropriate and effective interventions that can be used with many cultures.

#### *Memory Box.*

The first one is called a memory box. This is a great intervention that allows students to place items that symbolize special memories they had with the deceased. It is important to encourage students to talk about these special memories. When students are ready they may share their memory box and the memories inside with other family members and friends (Hospice, 1999).

*Memory Journal.*

Have students put together a memory journal. Students will take pieces of construction paper and either staple them or tie them together with ribbon. They will then have the opportunity to write a topic on the top of each page that is important to them. After they have chosen topics for the pages, they will journal about these topics. It is important to encourage the student to share what is important to them and why. This allows students to express their feelings, fears, and questions openly. When students are ready they may share their journal with other family members or friends if they wish.

*Bibliotherapy.*

Bibliotherapy is very effective. Either reading a book to a child or having the student read a book about death allows them to normalize the feelings they are going through. After the book is read the counselor may talk with the child about how they thought the characters in the book felt. It is also important to talk about if the students felt they could relate to the characters and why. There are many books published for children and adolescents on death. There are also many books about death dealing with cultures and religions.

*Memory Pictures.*

Memory pictures is a neat intervention for students. During this intervention students will use construction paper to make a scrapbook. On each page of the scrapbook they may glue or draw a picture of memories they have of the deceased. This gives students a way to share their feelings and memories openly with family and friends (Hospice, 1999).

*Small Groups.*

Offering small groups to students who are grieving allows them to see that they may be dealing with a different situation, but there are other students who are going through the same emotions and pain as they are. Groups provide information for students and help them make sense of death, death-related experiences, grief, and mourning (Morgan, 2002). Groups allow students to identify, validate, and normalize their strong feelings and other situations they are going through. Students feel they have permission to grieve in groups, and it is a safe place for them to express their feelings (Morgan, 2002). Overall, a group suggests constructive ways to remember or memorialize the life that has ended (Morgan, 2002).

### Conclusion

Children and adolescents are often pushed aside and their feelings are often disregarded in their times of grieving. Schools must step up and provide a positive supportive environment that allows students to grieve. Because children and adolescents rarely have anyone guiding or supporting them through this process, it is important for school counselors to increase their knowledge on the stages of grief and how children and adolescent grief is different than that of adults. As the population of many schools becomes more diverse, it is also essential for school counselors to gain knowledge on multicultural aspects of grief. Overall, it is so imperative for school counselors to take this information and educate faculty, staff, and families in order to provide a supportive environment for students who are grieving.

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