

**Grief in the Classroom: What to Do in the Event of a Death in the School
Community?**

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A death can confront a school community suddenly and unsettle everyday school life in a profound way. When a student, teacher, parent, or another member of the school community dies, schools are faced with several tasks at once: they need to communicate clearly, support affected students and staff, maintain a sense of safety and routine, and recognize the limits of what schools can provide. This presentation addresses these tasks from a school psychological perspective and draws on current work on grief in schools, school-based crisis response, and support for bereaved children and adolescents (Böhmer & Steffgen, 2022; National Association of School Psychologists, 2020; Schonfeld et al., 2024).

A central starting point is that grief reactions in children and adolescents can be highly diverse. Depending on age, personality, relationship to the deceased person, previous experiences, family context, and cultural or religious background, students may react with sadness, crying, anger, fear, withdrawal, irritability, silliness, or even laughter. Grief may also appear in changes in eating, concentration, sleep, activity level, or physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches, dizziness, or shortness of breath. Some students show their grief openly; others try to cope privately. Teachers may therefore find it difficult to interpret students' reactions correctly. A basic understanding of child and adolescent grief can help schools avoid both minimizing grief and over-pathologizing normal reactions, while still identifying students who may need more intensive support (Böhmer & Steffgen, 2022; Riera-Negre et al., 2024; Schonfeld et al., 2024).

The presentation also focuses on communication after a death in the school community. Schools should not act without first contacting the directly affected family. This initial contact is important not only to express sympathy and offer support, but also to clarify what happened and what may be communicated to others. Communication should be factual, careful, and as clear as possible. Written information can help avoid rumors and ensure that staff, students, and parents receive consistent

messages. Especially with younger children, euphemisms such as “gone to sleep” should be avoided, because they can lead to misunderstandings or fears. At the same time, communication must remain sensitive to the family’s wishes and to cultural or religious differences in mourning practices.

Another key theme is the balance between creating space for grief and maintaining routine. School can provide stability because it offers familiar people, predictable structures, and a sense of continuity. At the same time, students need opportunities to express grief in age-appropriate ways. Possible measures include a memorial space, a condolence book, letters or cards to the family, class discussions, creative activities, or a grief kit with books and materials. Decisions such as how to deal with an empty chair in the classroom should not follow a rigid script, but should be discussed with sensitivity and, when possible, with student involvement. Experiencing a sense of agency can help students and teachers cope with an otherwise overwhelming situation.

Teachers themselves may also be emotionally affected. They can show emotion, but they should not be left alone with the situation. A second teacher, school psychologist, member of the school leadership team, or crisis team can help contain strong emotional reactions in the classroom and provide additional support to individual students. Clear preparation before a crisis occurs is therefore essential. Schools benefit from crisis plans, contact lists, pre-defined communication pathways, and knowledge about external support systems. This is especially important because schools can offer important first support, but they cannot provide continuous grief care or replace specialized psychological or therapeutic help when this is needed.

Overall, the presentation argues that the greatest risk is not imperfection, but avoidance. Schools do not need to have perfect answers to every question about death, grief, religion, or the afterlife. What they do need is the willingness to look, listen, communicate honestly, offer structure, and be present. In this sense, grief work in schools is not about turning teachers into therapists. It is about helping the school community acknowledge loss, create safety, support affected students and staff, and

integrate grief into everyday school life without ignoring it.

References

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