

Returning to School After a Death

The return to school following a loss can be a difficult transition, for both children and adults. For many children the routine, structure, and support of school can be beneficial. Other children will need additional support. A child's readjustment to school can be a good indicator whether counseling or other services are appropriate. Though many caregivers are aware of this, it can be hard to know how best to prepare for the return to school. Keeping in mind the following practical suggestions may be helpful.

Prepare Your Child for Questions

Depending on the age of the child their peers may be aware of the recent death and have questions. It is important to prepare your child for the possibility that other children may be curious and inquire about the death. Make sure your child knows that they do not need to share any more information than they wish. If they are uncomfortable with questions being asked, suggest or practice some simple things they can say to their classmates to gently end conversations that make them upset or uncomfortable.

Notify Your Child's Teacher

Call your child's teacher and inform them of the loss. Teachers will often be very sympathetic to these situations. If they don't already have experience working with children who have experienced a recent death, being informed of what has happened will allow them the opportunity to research how to best support your child in the classroom. If your child is returning to school following a death that occurred over the summer, your child will likely have a new teacher who does not know their typical behavior. It may be helpful to inform the teacher how your child typically behaves, how well they typically perform in school, and a little about their personality. This will help the teacher identify conduct that is out of the ordinary. It will be useful to make a plan to keep in close communication with your child's teacher, either by email or phone, to discuss any changes in behavior or other concerns.

Speak with the School Counselor

Some common symptoms children may exhibit following a death are socially inappropriate behavior in school, poor grades, difficulty concentrating, anger, hyperactivity, physical symptoms like insomnia, loss of appetite or headaches, isolation, or depression. These symptoms are often temporary and occur as a normal part of grief. A school counselor is an important resource to provide support to your child through the normal grieving process. A school counselor can also assess whether these symptoms are especially severe, or if they are continuing beyond an expected timeframe. In these cases a child may benefit from referral to a mental health professional for evaluation. Some schools offer school-based mental health programs, allowing children to see a psychologist or social worker during the school day. If this service is not available at your child's school, a counselor can provide referrals for community bereavement groups, therapists, or grief camps.

If you have questions, are interested in finding out about grief resources for children in your area, or would like to discuss your child's transition back to school with a member of the Donor Family Services team, please contact us at 410-242-7000.