ADDRESSING GRIEF AND LOSS in STAFF AND STUDENTS

Loss and traumatic grief disrupts normal functioning and can feel never-ending. Every person needs to feel they are in a safe space to express and work through the stress, thoughts, and feelings related to grief and loss (Denckla, C. & et. al, 2020).

Feelings of grief and loss can apply to experiences, milestones, sense of safety, social connections, death of a loved one and more (Weir, K., 2020). Grief and loss are very personal, but there are common responses or stages experienced through the grieving process.

Stages or reactions to loss are not experienced in a linear fashion but are part of the framework that helps us identify the feelings associated with the loss and understand that grief is part of a healing process. Educators should consider that students and families may circle or swing back and forth through these “stages,” experiencing some feelings or reactions more than others and not necessarily in a prescribed order. (Kübler-Ross, E. & Kessler, D., 2014).

Grief and Loss Resources
Coalition to Support Grieving Students
Cultural Sensitivity Module
Child Mind Institute, Helping Children Cope with Grief
Hollis Easter, Grief Closet
Scott Bernato, That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief

³David Kessler Most Frequently Asked Questions about Grief
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, Responding to the Death of a Student or School Staff

STAGES AND REACTIONS OF GRIEF AND LOSS

Denial or Disbelief
Anger or Frustration
Bargaining or Guilt
Depression or Despair
Acceptance or Reintegration

HELPING OTHERS WORK THROUGH GRIEF AND LOSS

AGES 2-4
GRIEF EXPRESSIONS
Difficulty mastering new skills
Regression to earlier behaviors like:
- Thumb-sucking
- Bedwetting
- Sleep problems
- Irritability
- Confusion

HOW TO HELP
Provide honest, direct, brief answers to their questions.
Provide lots of reassurance and affection.
A consistent routine is also helpful.
At this age, play is their outlet for grieving.

AGES 4-7
GRIEF EXPRESSIONS
Nightmares
Regression to earlier behaviors
Changes in sleeping and eating
Violent play
Attempting to take on the role of the person who died
Difficulty mastering new skills

HOW TO HELP
Encourage expression of the child’s feelings through physical outlets as well as symbolic play (drawing and stories).
Validate emotions that emerge throughout the grief journey.
Talk about the person who died or acknowledge what has happened.

AGES 7-13
GRIEF EXPRESSIONS
Regression
School problems
Irritable or withdrawn
Acting out, changes in eating and sleeping habits
Overwhelming concerns over their own body; thoughts about their own death

HOW TO HELP
Encourage the expression of feelings, no matter what they are, and validate the emotions.
Explain options and allow for choices around funerals and memorial services.
Be present, but allow alone time, too. Encourage physical outlets.
Don’t avoid talking about the loss or answering questions; acknowledge what has happened.

AGES 13-18
GRIEF EXPRESSIONS
Extreme sadness, anger, or denial
School problems
Risk-taking behaviors
Preference for talking to peers and others outside of the family
Depression, even possible suicidal thoughts
Irritable or withdrawn

HOW TO HELP
Encourage them to talk to friends, teachers or therapist.
Do not attempt to “make it all better” or dismiss their grief.
Allow them to mourn. Be available but respect their need to grieve in their own way.
Model and teach students about grief.
Be prepared with what to say and do.

GRIEF AND LOSS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PANDEMIC

During this crisis, children may be grieving losses through death, but social distancing may also be causing feelings of grief and loss. Through changes in routine, social connectedness, and physical mobility, we are experiencing losses. (Ishoy, 2020). Changes in athletic seasons and extracurricular activities, the unconventional ending of the academic year, and having the freedom to have meet-ups with friends and family can all be perceived as losses and warrant a grief response.

It is important to grieve these losses, but also find hope and resilience in the new normals.
- New methods of connecting with others
- Time for self-care

Many children, families, and school staff are also feeling anticipatory grief – the discomfort felt when the future is unknown. Typically this is associated with a terminal illness or anticipated death. However, it can be applied more broadly. When things are out of our control, our sense of safety is compromised. (Bernato, 2020).

Being mindful of these types of grief and loss will help educators build connections and support for their students during these unprecedented times.

COVID-19 Resources
1 The Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University, Managing Bereavement around the Coronavirus.
2 American Psychological Association, Grief & COVID-19: Mourning our Bygone
3 Purdue University - Counseling and Psychological Services, Mourning the Changes Since COVID