



USING BOOKS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH GRIEF, LOSS AND HEALING



NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION



Using Books to Support Students Through Grief, Loss and Healing

Table of Contents

About This Discussion Guide	1
The Grieving Elementary Student	3
The Grieving Middle School Student	4
The Grieving High School Student	5
Additional Resources	6



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The New York Life Foundation has been a leading resource for helping educators, families, communities and caregivers learn how to support children who have lost a parent or sibling. The unfortunate reality is that 1 in 15 children will lose a parent or sibling by the time they are 18.¹ Childhood bereavement is often overlooked, often misunderstood, yet common in American society. Together, the New York Life Foundation and First Book have created this discussion guide to help educators harness the power of books to help students of all ages as they experience grief, loss, and healing.

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¹ Results from the Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM) developed by Judi's House/JAG Institute www.judishouse.org/CBEM.

Using Books to Support Students Through Grief, Loss and Healing

About This Discussion Guide

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grieving is a process that unfolds differently for each individual. No two people will grieve exactly alike, and, like adults, children and teens also move through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Grieving children may not be ready to talk about what they have experienced right away. Some may show signs of irrational fear and need extra reassurance that they are safe. Some may express their grief through anger, guilt, behaviors that seem childlike for their age, or disruptive or risky behavior. These are all signals that the child is grieving and needs adult support.

WHAT A GRIEVING STUDENT NEEDS

One of the most important things that grieving students need is for the caring, supportive adults around them to acknowledge what has happened. Seeing students experience a tragedy is difficult for educators, and some may choose to respond with silence rather than risk saying the “wrong” thing. However, by saying nothing, the student may assume that the adults around them do not care, are not capable of offering support, or that it is wrong to discuss death and loss.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS

Experts in childhood grief and loss advise using simple and direct language to express genuine concern and initiate a conversation. It’s perfectly okay to feel awkward in this situation. Let the student know you are aware of what has happened and listen if they feel open to talking.

Acknowledge that this can be difficult to discuss, and let them know that children and adults often find it helpful to talk about their feelings. Let them know you are available and/or help them identify other adults with whom they can speak when they are ready.

TIPS AND TACTICS

- Listen and ask questions. It may be tempting to say you understand what the child is feeling based on your own experience, but remember that everyone’s experience is different. Ask the student, “Can you tell me what you have been feeling? What have you been thinking about since your loved one died? How is your family? Have you been worrying about anything?”
- Be a witness to the student’s distress. When a student is ready to talk, they may express big emotions through crying or yelling. This may be uncomfortable for you, but it is important to give the student space to express their grief. Your presence with the student is powerful.
- Normalize their feelings, whatever they are, and remind them of the expected range of emotions and how these may evolve in different stages.
- Avoid trying to “cheer up” a student who has experienced a loss, encouraging them to cover up their emotions by saying “be strong,” or saying that you “know how they feel.” More recommendations are available at the Coalition to Support Grieving Students: <https://grievingstudents.org/module-section/what-not-to-say/>.
- Allow the conversation to move toward positive ways to process their grief over time and develop healthy coping skills, such as reading books, journaling and exploring other creative outlets.

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HOW BOOKS CAN HELP

Books can serve as tools that help children process their grief. Books can help students feel less alone by showing characters who have experienced something similar. Depending on the content, they can also help students understand complex feelings, explain the facts and permanence of death, or even help students connect with memories of their deceased loved one.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This resource offers guidance on how to use books with children experiencing grief and loss. It provides suggestions of what to look for when choosing books to use with children in elementary, middle and high school, and potential reflection questions that may be useful. Possible uses for the reflection questions could include:

- One-on-one conversations between educators and students
- Individual, personal reflection that the grieving student works on independently (e.g. writing in a journal)
- Small group discussions in bereavement or grief support groups
- Adult and child conversations that take place within the family
- Class or group discussions that can help others understand the feelings and behaviors of their grieving classmates

For additional guidance on using this guide to fit your situation, consult with your program leader, school counselor or school social worker.

CHECK OUT THESE TITLES & MORE!



**THE FIRST BOOK
MARKETPLACE**
[WWW.FBMARKETPLACE.ORG/
GRIEF-LOSS-AND-HEALING](http://WWW.FBMARKETPLACE.ORG/GRIEF-LOSS-AND-HEALING)

The Grieving Elementary Student

Children begin to develop an understanding of the facts of death between five and seven years of age. Young children who experience a death may not fully understand what has happened. They may ask questions or make statements about the deceased person as though they were still living. They may feel responsible for the death ("If I picked up my toys, Dad would still be alive.") or have magical thoughts that their behavior could bring the person back ("If I do well in school, Mom will come home."). Young children who are not ready to acknowledge the loss may behave as though nothing has happened. It may take them weeks or months before they feel ready to talk about the death.

CHOOSING HELPFUL BOOKS

- Look for books that help explain the basic facts about death. Be sensitive to different cultural and religious views about what happens to someone after they die and keep this in mind in your conversation with students.
- Look for books in which characters feel multiple feelings simultaneously. A grieving child may feel guilty if something makes them feel happy. Books can help children understand that it is possible, and normal, to feel many things at once.
- Look for books that show there is no "right way" to feel, grieve or express sadness.



FACILITATOR TIPS FOR USING BOOKS

- While reading, point out facial expressions and body language that give clues as to what the characters may be feeling. Give students plenty of time to observe the illustrations in addition to reading the text.
- Ask students to predict how the characters' feelings may affect their behavior or actions. Ask them to reflect on how characters' feelings may have affected their behaviors or choices.
- Students experiencing grief may not respond to the questions or to the book you've chosen as you anticipated they would. Allow that to be okay. They are still listening to discussions taking place. Books also help the grieving child's classmates build empathy and learn to show compassion.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. It can be confusing to feel more than one feeling at once, like the character in the book we read. What are some feelings that a person may feel at the same time? Would you like to share anything about times when you have felt more than one feeling, such as feeling angry with someone and missing them, or feeling sad about something big that has happened but happy about something little?
2. It is hard to feel big feelings. How did the characters in the book feel? How do their feelings affect their behaviors? Have you noticed any ways that your feelings and behaviors are connected? Are there certain things that you do when you feel sad, angry, or confused?
3. What would you like to say to the character experiencing grief? What things did other characters say or do that were the most helpful to the grieving character?
4. Would you like to talk about, write about, or draw any of your favorite memories of the person who died? Is there another way that you would like to remember or celebrate that person?

The Grieving Middle School Student

At this age, grieving students will understand that death is permanent. However, they may still have confused or magical thinking that something they could have done differently would have prevented the death. They may feel guilt or regret in response to the death. They may fixate on the details of their loved one's death. A grieving middle school student may become hypervigilant or anxious, fearing that the world is not safe.

CHOOSING HELPFUL BOOKS

- Look for books that feature characters in whom students will see their own culture, class, family structures, and life experiences reflected.
- Look for books that allow characters to express a range of emotions and behaviors after experiencing a loss, rather than books that teach a “right way” to process grief.
- Look for titles that are age-appropriate for individual students both in the content and reading abilities. Some middle school students may still benefit from advanced picture books or short chapter books while others will need books that are longer and more complex.



FACILITATOR TIPS FOR USING BOOKS

- The immediate aftermath of the loss may be consumed by adjusting to a new reality of life after the death. The grieving student may be more ready to connect with books and characters that have experienced loss in the weeks and months after the death rather than immediately following it.
- Some students may benefit from a shared reading or “book club” experience with you, a caring adult. Consider reading chapters independently and then coming together at a set time to talk about the book. Talking about what the characters experience may help students process their own loss without the pressure of talking about it directly.
- When reading and discussing books as a group, offer opportunities for individual students to choose to share how the reading connects to their own life experiences, but do not call out individual students who have experienced loss.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What did the character feel after the loss? How did those feelings change over time?
2. What strategies did the character use to cope with their feelings? Which of the strategies seemed to be the most helpful for this character?
3. How did the loss affect the character's feelings of safety or security?
4. How did the character continue to feel connected to their loved one or to remember their loved one after the death? How can you remember loved ones after they die? What can you do to stay connected to them and celebrate their memory?

The Grieving High School Student

It is common for grief to manifest as anger in older students. They may withdraw from school or act out in disruptive ways. It is important to remember that although older, high school students are still grieving children, not adults, and to approach them with compassion while maintaining boundaries. Encourage the student to find ways to express what they are feeling, not only through talking but also through music, art, writing, or physical activity. If a student is willing to share with you, listen actively and validate the emotions being expressed.

CHOOSING HELPFUL BOOKS

- Look for books that feature characters in whom students will see their own culture, class, family structures, and life experiences reflected.
- Look for titles that are age-appropriate for individual students both in the content and reading abilities. Some students may need books with mature themes which are not too long or complex in their writing.
- Don't shy away from books that include provocative content or language.

FACILITATOR TIPS FOR USING BOOKS

- Silence can be golden. Remember that you don't always have to know the "right" thing to say. Sometimes just being present with a grieving student, acknowledging their pain, is what is best.
- Incorporate books in which characters experience grief and loss into your curriculum, even if you are not aware of a specific student in your class or group who has had this experience. This exposure can help normalize the discussion of grief and build empathy among classmates.
- Students may want to talk with someone other than you about the themes the book brings up for them. Consider setting up a book club support group for students who have experienced loss or recommend books for students and family members to read together.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. With which characters do you most closely identify? Why?
2. What did you feel in response to the characters' behaviors? Did anyone frustrate or annoy you? Did anyone make you feel worried? How were the characters' behaviors affected by their emotions?
3. How did characters in the book try to help the character who was grieving? How did the grieving character respond?
4. In what ways have others tried to help you in your grief? What has been most helpful? What has been least helpful? Why?

Using Books to Support Students Through Grief, Loss and Healing

Additional Resources

Remember that you do not have to be an expert to offer compassion to a grieving student. If you'd like to learn more about how to best support students experiencing grief, the following resources and training modules may be helpful:

- Coalition to Support Grieving Students
<https://grievingstudents.org/>
- New York Life: Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative
<https://grievingstudents.org/gssi/>
- New York Life Bereavement Resource
<https://www.achildgrief.com>
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
<https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org>
- First Book Marketplace – Books About Difficult Life Experiences
<https://www.fbmarketplace.org/difficult-life-experiences>
- First Book Marketplace – Books to Support Grief, Loss and Healing
<https://www.fbmarketplace.org/grief-loss-and-healing>
- Eluna Resource Center
<https://elunanetwork.org/resources/>
- National Alliance for Grieving Children
<https://childrengrieve.org/>
- Sesame Street: Helping Kids Grieve
<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>



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