

## SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

### Addressing Grief in the Classroom: A Complicated Equalizer

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#### **Abstract**

*Grief is a complicated equalizer and a personal reaction to loss. Losing a loved one is a universal experience, but fear keeps grief quiet and misunderstood. When teachers not trained in death education, it can affect children's grieving process. When grief is not processed in a healthy way, the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, affecting a child's learning and mental health. Anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns can present themselves without the help of practices that support emotion regulation and personal grief expression. Schools need bereavement-trained teachers, death education, emotion regulation practices, and counsellors trained in play-based therapies to support grieving children.*

Almost everyone will encounter some type of bereavement and grief in their lifetime. Bereavement is undergoing the loss or death of a loved one (Brown & Goodman, 2005), while grief is the natural, internalized reaction one has to a loss (Costelloe et al., 2020). A child's conceptual understanding about death can result in misconceptions that may be incorrect, unhelpful, and detrimental to the grieving process (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018). Therefore, it is important that teachers have training and support in bereavement and loss, provide death education to all students, and foster a sense of community in the classroom that provides grief support from peers. Grief can interfere with children's ability to learn emotion regulation skills and to practice self-control, directly affecting their mental health and emotional wellbeing (McLafferty, 2020). Classroom-based programs or practices that teach and model emotion regulation, such as The Zones of Regulation, mindfulness, and yoga, can prepare students for a range of grief emotions and provide grieving students with vocabulary and strategies to cope. About 20-25% of bereaved adolescents develop mental health problems, including internalizing disorders such as depression, following the death of a parent (Stikkelbroek et al., 2016, p. 55). Establishing a connection with a school or divisional counsellor who can counsel with age-appropriate play-based therapy is necessary in supporting these grieving students beyond the classroom. Bereavement and grief training for teachers, teaching and practicing emotion regulation in the classroom, and providing individual play-based or music therapy in the school will provide a secure, supportive place for grieving children to process all their feelings (The Dougy Center, n.d.).

#### **Addressing Grief Misconceptions and Death Anxiety: Teacher Training, Death Education, & Peer Support**

It is estimated that 5-15% of children will bereave a significant loved one before 18 years of age (Chen & Panebianco, 2018, p. 152). Therefore, it is likely that all teachers will provide care for at least one grieving child in their career (Carrington, 2019). Teachers who intentionally create a significant protective support by listening and responding with empathy can be a positive force (The Dougy Center, n.d.), especially if the child's caregiver is depressed or emotionally unavailable (Stikkelbroek et al., 2016). Unfortunately, due to curriculum pressures and a lack of training in bereavement and loss, teachers often take a reactive rather than proactive approach to grief (Costelloe et al., 2020). For teachers to feel comfortable and confident supporting grieving students, they need direct purposeful training on grief and the grieving process. Death education integrated into the curriculum, with a focus on peer support, is an essential component that normalizes death and provides a classroom of support to grieving children. Grief is learned through observation and can be interpreted individually

(Heath & Cole, 2012). Schools can have a monumental effect on grieving children, by providing well-trained teachers with the empathy and knowledge to teach death education and promote peer support.

Children's grieving process depends on their age and conceptual understanding, which usually matures around the age of seven when they can comprehend the permanence and universality of death (Costelloe et al., 2020). Many children develop their own set of misconceptions, which may lead to behavioural and psychological symptoms (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). For example, my young children have blamed themselves and blamed others close to them, following the death of their father. My two youngest do not completely understand the permanence of death, and I fear they may mistake it for abandonment in the future. My husband died suddenly, leaving all of us in shock with no chance to say goodbye. As a result, my children have ruminated on the loss and created fantasies about the death. Losing one of their primary caregivers has led to a change in routine, decreased the emotional availability of other family members, and created new fears and worries. This loss may lead to anxiety, confusion, and pathological symptoms that may or may not require treatment, as they struggle to navigate the grieving process (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). In some instances, school may be the only safe place where a grieving child feels a sense of normalcy. However, many teachers do not know how to address grief in the classroom (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018). If children are not equipped with the correct information in a proactive manner within their haven, they may develop death anxiety and death denial.

Providing teachers with knowledge in the form of grief and bereavement training would empower teachers to provide proper support for grieving students. Teachers then become an important link with counsellors and therapists, because they can watch for signs of isolation, declining grades, and other changes that may require referrals (Dyregrov et al., 2015). With proper training and background knowledge, teachers understand how grief contributes to learning difficulties at different stages in the grieving process, and how it affects different age groups in terms of attendance, schoolwork, and concentration (Reid, 2002). Teachers want to become more mindful of typical grieving responses, find confidence in their approach to individuals, and recognize symptoms of chronic grief. The topic of grief in the school should be included in professional development, planning days, and staff meetings because it deserves an exclusive focus, apart from general psychological problems. For students to feel equally supported and achieve academic success, all teachers must agree upon special consideration for a grieving child (Dyregrov et al., 2015). Teacher training would provide consistency in availability, communication, and emotional support between different teachers of bereaved students. Supporting teachers and providing a solid response plan for grieving children may reduce the stress in staff and children, relieve suffering in the bereaved, and result in positive experiences despite the traumatic situation.

Educating children about the grief process, helping children to express all feelings associated with grief, and understanding common misconceptions about death, are all integral in supporting children in grief (Heath & Cole, 2011). When students were interviewed about returning to school following a parental death, many felt that school was not effective in listening, acknowledging their loss, discussing support with their peers, and offering death education (Holland, 2003). I was on a maternity leave when my husband died and was able to home-school my son every second day to provide him with opportunities to read, listen to music, and watch movies that showed grief reactions. Not all adults are so fortunate or have the emotional resilience to provide this support. Death education is a pro-active approach to helping children develop healthy and well-informed opinions about death, become more empathetic to others, and develop coping skills for future bereavement (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001). Classroom teachers, rather than specialized guest teachers, are the best equipped to provide death education to children because they are well-known and trusted by their students, know each child individually, are familiar with the culture in their classroom, and are trained in a variety of effective pedagogical practices (Reid, 2002). Grief and death can either be directly taught in the school curriculum, by addressing how change and loss affect a person's life, or indirectly integrated through a spiral curriculum, in response to questions being asked in the classroom about death and dying (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2016). Teaching death education in a group classroom

setting can provide honest information, confront distortions in understanding, and help children to reframe their thought process about death and grief (Register & Hilliard, 2008). Advocating for death education integration into classroom curriculum is important because school counsellors and classroom teachers do not always have the time to provide individual support to grieving students.

It is imperative that schools intervene with bereaved students, and strengthen their social connectedness with their peers in order to reduce isolation and encourage emotional expression (Heath & Cole, 2011). Peers and teachers can offer profound emotional support to grieving children by helping them ease through transitions, supporting their return to regular activities, and standing beside them as they cope with their grief (Reid, 2002). Peers often want to express their support, but do not know how. Teachers can facilitate these support opportunities by designating a specific area for students to express their compassion for their classmate with cards or pictures. My son and I appreciated the notes that were sent home from his peers, and we were especially comforted by the monthly cards and gifts that came from a group of educators and their families in our village. Teachers can integrate death education and peer support into their curriculum by modeling coping strategies, providing opportunities for students to express sympathy and memorialize the deceased, and sharing stories about death using bibliotherapy techniques (Heath & Cole, 2011). Reading carefully chosen stories in the classroom is an inclusive opportunity to ask questions about and discuss death, model behaviors expected with grief, and reduce feelings of isolation in the grieving child. Bereaved children appreciate the comfort and helpfulness that peers can provide to alleviate some of their suffering.

A person's first response to trauma or grief will often be either to shut down or to act strong and isolate. However, connection is essential because grievers require others to lean on while processing their emotions (Carrington, 2019). Children suffering from trauma or loss need the school to act as a village and recognize that they are not operating from a regulated space. Grief is not a problem to be solved, but a process to be supported. It is essential that teachers have sustained training and support to find the most appropriate pedagogical approach for dealing with the topic of death in the classroom (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2016), while also being aware of their own personal responses to loss (Reid, 2002). Teachers can teach students how to support themselves and others who are grieving by showing children that death and grief are ordinary topics that can be discussed naturally. Death education should be common practice, providing concrete death information to young children in a direct and pro-active way in order to dispel fears, confusions, and misconceptions that may negatively impact them as they grow up (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). Since many of our students do not know how to respond to others in grief, teachers must provide them with a script and permission to connect with their grieving peers (Carrington, 2019). Death education, peer support, and teacher training in bereavement and loss will lessen death anxiety in the classroom and minimize death misconceptions for grievers.

### **Addressing Grief & Emotion Dysregulation in the Classroom: Mindfulness, Yoga, & The Zones of Regulation**

Grief can leave a traumatic impact on a child, heightening social, academic, emotional, and behavioural issues (Carrington, 2019). The death of a loved one can negatively influence a child's emotion regulation skills, ranging from a constant feeling of sadness to intense anger and a lingering sense of dread or fear. Supporting grieving children's emotional expressions and normalizing their feelings helps children feel connected. Actively processing emotions through physical yoga practice and mindfulness creates a foundation for self-regulation; it is empowering for grieving children to know that they can feel, process, and withstand any emotion (Cook-Cottone, 2017). Mindfulness may reduce anger and aggression in these children, because it invites students to practice responding with intention, rather than automatically reacting when difficult emotions develop (Cardinal, 2020). Self-regulation programs such as The Zones of Regulation teach students how to recognize and communicate their feelings in a safe and non-judgmental manner by categorizing the feelings and states that they often experience (Kuypers, 2011). Teaching emotion regulation skills and practicing mindful awareness are essential to supporting all children, especially grieving children, who are in a

heightened state of emotional arousal and exhaustion.

Emotion regulation refers to the ability to regulate positive and negative emotions, and manage how they are expressed (Schlesier et al., 2018). It plays an important role in a child's social skills, cognitive development, and ability to learn (McLafferty, 2020). Emotions and learning are interconnected: the learning process is compromised when emotions overwhelm and highjack the brain, resulting in distress, anxiety, and a limited ability to concentrate (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016). The bodies and minds of children who have experienced trauma perceive constant threats and are in chronic reactive mode (Carrington, 2019). The sympathetic nervous system becomes highly activated when cortisol increases, resulting in emotion dysregulation and fatigue. Children's mental health and academic achievement may be seriously affected when they cannot regulate emotions efficiently. Chronic emotional frustration may make it difficult to stay on task and complete work on time, resulting in lower academic engagement, motivation, and success (Schlesier et al., 2019). Teachers are the ones who support bereaved students daily, but they are not trained in bereavement and loss. Teachers may also experience an overwhelm of worry, guilt, and sadness, resulting in emotional exhaustion and limiting their ability to co-regulate with the grieving child.

Yoga and other mindfulness practices can provide preventative care by teaching self-regulation to students and teachers, and prescriptive care by supporting students who are at risk or in need of intervention (Cook-Cottone, 2017). It seems only natural that mindfulness be a support to grievers since grief is a natural human experience that causes suffering, and mindfulness is a practice that aims to reduce suffering (Stang, 2018). Both mindfulness and grief create transformation: grief forces change, while mindfulness invites the griever to acknowledge the change with mindful acceptance rather than resistance. Practicing mindfulness and yoga has been my life preserver in bereavement. For a year, my son struggled with emotion regulation, and exhibited a fixed mindset in a large school that was only beginning to explore mindfulness. When he returned to a smaller school where teachers and students practice mindfulness regularly, his inner dialogue began to shift, and he became more self-compassionate and aware of the choices he had in response to triggers. Mindfulness can be defined as being present in the moment with all of one's senses (Stang, 2018). It invites the griever to live in present awareness with the loss, and prevents avoidance of pain, overindulgence in suffering, and the need to fix. Mindfulness and yoga encourage students to practice perseverance and use grit, because they are asked to work outside their comfort zone, stay focused on difficult tasks, and cope with feelings of frustration (Cook-Cottone, 2017). Students learn mindful awareness of their body sensations, breathing techniques to focus on the present moment, and ways to replace negative inner thoughts with empowering self-talk. If children can calm themselves by breathing, they can begin to function in the social engagement part of their brain and make aligned choices.

The Zones of Regulation is a curriculum that uses a cognitive behavior approach to teach students the skills necessary for self-regulation (Kuypers, 2011). Self-regulation refers to regulating sensory needs, emotions, and impulses in order to reach goals and behave appropriately in any given environment. Adopting this curriculum into the classroom for all students will support the griever directly and prepare other students for their future grief experiences, by helping them become more aware of the tools they can use to self-regulate. Emotion regulation is one of the components of self-regulation that grieving children struggle with. My son could move from one state to another in an instant due to the trauma response in his amygdala from grief. He often felt out of control, and that scared him. The Zones of Regulation played a role in my son's education and my teaching career. This prior knowledge gave our family a common vocabulary that grounded him and brought him back to awareness. The Zones of Regulation addresses objectivity, motivation, and understanding other perspectives, which are all important for emotion regulation (Kuypers, 2011). The lessons in the program teach students to recognize when they are in states or "zones," leading to better self-control and problem solving. The zones are represented by different colors, which are very relatable when asking children to describe the color of their emotions in grief. My younger daughter is now becoming efficient at regulating by using the colors to recognize and describe her emotions. Through the different activities, students are given strategies to stay in a zone or help them move towards another zone by using sensory tools, calming practices, and cognitive approaches (Kuypers, 2011). The

program was initially designed only for students struggling with self-regulation and mental health disorders, but it has become apparent that all people can benefit from this program, especially grieving children.

Grief and loss trigger a chronic stress response in the amygdala, affecting responsible decision making, planning, and emotion regulation (Cardinal, 2020). Children, especially those who are grieving, need direct instruction on emotion regulation, because they are often operating in the parasympathetic nervous system and need support in awareness and thought patterns. Emotionally competent students, those who can regulate and express their emotions well, have a higher self-esteem, quality peer relationships, and more positive outlook on life, even in negative situations (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016). Mindfulness-based techniques and yoga practices have been known to reduce the physical symptoms of grief, calm the mind and regulate emotions, improve self-awareness and self-compassion, and make meaning of loss to move forward (Stang, 2018). The Zones of Regulation provides direct instruction on teaching students to notice the behaviors expected in given circumstances, then determine how they will manage their behavior while in different zones (Kuypers, 2011). The four zones are not labeled good or bad; it is understood that everyone will experience all zones. Self-regulation and emotion regulation programs and practices being directly taught in the classroom, such as mindfulness, yoga, and The Zones of Regulation, are pro-active solutions to supporting dysregulated and grieving students.

### **Addressing Mental Health Issues Related to Grief: Play-Based Therapy & Music Therapy as Intervention**

Grief misconceptions and emotion dysregulation, along with poor concentration in school, lower self-esteem, and lower school attendance, may create a spiral effect that negatively impacts a child's mental health (Burrell et al., 2020). Children who struggle regulating their emotions have a poor emotional well-being that may cause distress, anxiety, depression, and poor academic achievement (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016). They may isolate from their peers because their low self-esteem may result in feeling misunderstood, unconfident, and detached. The most explicit component to supporting a grieving child is a connection with a school counsellor or division-wide therapist, who can make future referrals and provide age-appropriate play-based therapy for children to express their feelings. For young children, play therapies with a trusted counsellor are commonly used grief interventions, because play is the most natural form of learning and communication for young children seeking to understand the world around them (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). Older grieving children may benefit from music therapy to deal with difficult life experiences by exploring their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in a safe and structured environment through improvisation and creativity (Register & Hilliard, 2008). Direct support and acknowledgement of bereavement from a teacher and trusted school or divisional counsellor will positively impact a child's coping skills.

Children are at high risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and somatic issues when they experience a traumatic death, have a close relationship to the deceased, and have poor coping strategies (Brown & Goodman, 2005). One year after the death of a parent, 19% of bereaved children will experience substantial impairment in functioning because of challenges such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and childhood traumatic grief (CTG) (LaFreniere & Cain, 2015, pp. 246-247). Children and teens who experience the most severe trauma may show high PTSD symptoms because they cannot comprehend what is happening and may have inadequate support (Carrington, 2019; Heath & Cole, 2012). When my husband died over 20 months ago, I used many supports and early intervention programs, yet my oldest son still struggled. He was exhibiting a decrease in self-esteem, happiness, and school success, which led to an onset of anxiety, anger, fear, and social issues. His teacher was supportive, and I was made aware that he was struggling to concentrate and distracting himself from academic tasks. However, I was not mindful that he was avoiding talking about his loss. My child experienced one of the most distressing experiences a child may have, and did not feel comfortable talking to his teachers and classmates about it. I was at home with my two younger children and struggling with anxiety, depression, and PTSD at the time. Looking

back, I wish I would have connected with his counsellor to ensure he was expressing his grief at school, but I was doing the best I could, and the school did not express concern at the time. When children are grieving the death of a parent, they are at high risk of exhibiting internalizing problems within the first two years and mental health problems by age 19 (Stikkelbroek et al., 2016, p. 58). If schools or teachers are not aware of these problems, grieving children may not receive the mental health support they need.

Students should be given many opportunities to express their feelings through drawing, coloring, writing, or playing. Asking children to reflect on the hardest parts of their loss and the best parts of the loved one may create a safe place for the students to work out their feelings (Carrington, 2019). This is a worthy goal, but not always possible within a teacher's day. Therefore, it is essential for school or divisional counsellors to form a strong relationship with a grieving child and provide targeted emotional interventions when necessary through play-based therapy, talk therapy and music therapy (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001). Children use play as a mode of communication to demonstrate their anxieties and confusions with a trusted counsellor. A variety of play materials are important for the children to act out their fears, worries, and version of the death, including art supplies, blocks, dolls, puppets, rescue vehicles, and medical kits (Boyd Webb, 2011). My son and daughter both attend private play therapy where they work through their grief reactions with toys, bringing order to the chaos of their thoughts, re-joining the parts of their grief puzzle, and providing a feeling of safety and security. Having a trained play-based therapist or counsellor within a school or division would provide all grieving children access to effective intervention for their social-emotional well-being because it helps them to understand death, normalizes their grief reactions, and encourages expression of their grief (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). A child-friendly treatment, such as play therapy, can improve children's emotional healing and coping skills to move them towards a calm and peaceful resolution in their grief.

Many older children struggle to verbalize the chaotic emotions of grief through language and play. Offering musical dialogue as a form of emotional expression can support autonomy, self-expression, and identification, while also teaching decision-making skills (Register & Hilliard, 2008). Music therapy is one of the two most promising models for working with grieving children (Chen & Panebianco, 2018), yet it is not often available in rural communities. My children use a listening program with their play therapist called Safe and Sound Protocol (SSP), which is a physiological therapy that uses different songs and tones to stimulate the vagus nerve and give cues of safety to the nervous system (Integrated Listening Systems, n.d.). It uses the science of neuroplasticity and bottom-up solutions to help children become more resilient, aware, and regulated. Such a program could be used with grieving children in all schools with the proper training. For older children and teenagers, music therapy in school seems less threatening than talk therapies and provides an appropriate starting point to help them seek further support in the community (McFerran & Hunt, 2008). Teenagers have a desperate need to belong, but grief is often a very isolating process. Music therapy is one support that may not threaten their developmental need for autonomy and belonging, but encourages them to process their grief and express their feelings. This approach invites students to discuss grief and all the unpredictable feelings associated with it, validating their emotions, and giving them a sense of control by creatively expressing themselves through song.

A child whose parent dies suddenly may also have suicidal thoughts, achieve lower grades, and be less likely to graduate with future career aspirations (Burrell et al., 2020) because depression and anxiety can directly impact academic success (McLafferty, 2020). Individual counselling, play therapy, and bibliotherapy can all be early intervention strategies to facilitate mourning and prevent depression and other future mental health problems (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001). Having a trained play-based therapist in a school or division, who could provide physiological therapies such as SSP, would be ideal for supporting young children with any type of trauma or loss. Music therapy for teenagers and older children promotes grievers to feel successful and comfortable while making decisions, problem solving, and expressing their emotions with validation (Register & Hilliard, 2008). Communication with family and referrals to private counsellors or bereavement groups can also help grieving children feel supported by a village of people. I have witnessed first-hand with my son how care, availability, and

communication from a counsellor or therapist are significant principles when supporting a grieving child with anxiety.

### Conclusion

Grief is a universal but complicated equalizer (Carrington, 2019). We will all lose a loved one, but how we respond to that loss is deeply personal. It takes a village to support the conceptual understanding, academic success, emotion regulation, and mental health of grieving children. School must act as a village, a refuge, and a crucial element in a child's world when bereavement affects their life (Reid, 2002). The greatest gift a grieving child can receive is a teacher who will listen, sit with the child's pain, and encourage the child to talk about the loved one. The staff in my son's school do just that and so much more. The teachers continue to educate themselves and the students on grief and grief reactions by willingly opening class and peer discussions about change and loss, practising mindfulness and yoga, and using The Zones of Regulation program. My son and daughter participate in child-directed play therapy and SSP outside of the school system, and the effects on their mental health are profound. It is important to advocate for specialized music and play therapists in schools or divisions, in order to provide this care to all grieving students in a safe and comfortable environment. A broad range of coping mechanisms is important, because the grieving process is so individual and there are many stages of conceptual understanding in grief (Register & Hilliard, 2008). Caring and well-trained adults to teach death education and peer support, instruction in emotion regulation and mindful practices, and age-appropriate play-based or music therapy are all valuable supports that should be a priority for grieving students in all schools.

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