

Coping with the Death of a Parent

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Introduction:

Twenty percent of children before the age of 18 will experience the death of a loved one. In the last couple of months, several of my students have lost a parent. The loss of a parent can be devastating for children and adolescents, and the way a child reacts to loss can look different than that of an adult. Long term grief or avoidance of grief can have a detrimental impact on a child's health, as well as the risk of developing more severe problems later in life. Counselors, social workers and educators should become knowledgeable in how to support and offer help to the students who experience bereavement.

Research:

Mental Health & Academics:

- There is a positive correlation between children who have mental disorders or emotional disturbances to academic struggles, alcohol or drug use, violence and suicide (Holt, 2011).
- Research findings suggest that children who experience mental health problems are at risk of unfavorable academic outcomes. Lower grade point average, reading delays, poor academic attendance and school drop-out ideation are more often seen in students with mental health concerns (Murphy et. Al, 2015).
- Depression, anxiety, PTSD and other mental health disorders can have a negative affect on a student's self-concept, mental ability, energy level, optimism, engagement, interests and behavior. All of the aforementioned effects play a role in poor academic performance (IBCCES).

Resiliency:

- Poverty, disadvantaged neighborhoods, and exposure to violence can contribute to a child's ability to be resilient in adverse situations (Nguyen, 2013).
- Protective factors such as positive social support, parental relationship quality (living parent), and high self-esteem/ concept aid in generating hope for success. Protective factors contribute to the development of resiliency (Nguyen, 2013).
- A student experiencing a loss will be vulnerable and their ability to deal with grief in a healthy manner relies heavily on a safe familiar environment and a caring, support system (Wango & Gwiyo, 2021).

Coping Skills:

- Counselors, educators and other student support staff can provide grieving students with tools to cope with the pain of losing a parent.
- According to Marino, Thornton and Lange (2015), "grieving can disrupt a child's normal functioning, but helping the child work through their emotions can foster emotional healing and restoration of the child's overall health."

Grief is like the ocean, it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim

- VICKI HARRISON

Healthy Practices that Promote Healing:

- Talk to a trustworthy adult- Expressing feelings is vital!
- Be honest about your feelings
- Become familiar with the 5 stages of grief
- Building self-esteem
- Allow yourself a grieving period- *It is OK to cry!*
- Participate in a support group with school counselor
- Art therapy- Create a memory book, journal writing
- Find a constructive way to release anger, frustrations- exercise
- Learn healthy ways to express feelings
- Do something to honor your loved one- balloon message, writing a letter
- Spend time with family and friends

Conclusion:

Limitations of studies:

- Minimal number of studies available that examine the effects of death on children

Implications for Professional School Counselors:

Death is inevitable. Our students are experiencing loss, especially now that we are in a pandemic. Loss in general, but especially the loss of a parent, can be detrimental to a child's mental health. Counselors need to be prepared to support the students who are grieving. We must also recognize that children of different age levels will grief differently, and we have to be prepared to target our response and support to meet their needs. No matter the age group, research has shown that a meaningful relationship with a trusted adult and a safe environment is essential in the grieving process. The lack of information regarding this subject concerns me. Educators should work diligently to become more knowledgeable in this particular area in order to be prepared to support children who have endured such an unfortunate experience (Morgan & Roberts, 2010).

How can we support our students?

- Build relationships
- Be a GOOD listener
- Provide a safe space
- Establish support groups
- Become knowledgeable of developmental as well as cultural differences in relation to grief
- Encourage positive relationships with family members
- Provide resources or necessary referrals as needed
- Be open to using various strategies such as drawing, journaling, etc. to promote healing.



Figure 1: brief description of your figure

Signs of difficulty coping with grief (Wango & Gwiyo, 2021):

- Loss of interest in daily activities and events for an extended period of time
- Eating and sleep disorders
- Prolonged fear of being alone
- Anxiety, panic attacks, aggression
- Social withdrawal
- Significant decline in school performance
- Refusal to attend school
- Regression of age-appropriate behavior



Figure 2: brief description of your figure

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