

Loss in the family – A reflection on how schools can support their students



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Abstract: Each year, thousands of British schoolchildren experience the loss of a loved one. In this trying time, it is vital that school staff have a good understanding of how to offer support. Sadly, many school staff struggle with how to provide support and in what form. Based on experiences from Scandinavia, in this article we provide guidelines and practical advice for the forms of support which we consider beneficial. In cases of anticipated losses, the school can do its utmost to collaborate with the home and student in order to ensure efficient communication and good student care. Following a loss, the school should work to provide a caring climate that makes it easier to return to class. We recommend making most decisions in collaboration with the bereaved children in order to ensure they receive support they themselves find beneficial.

Keywords: grief in children, school performance, follow-up in schools, educational initiatives

Introduction

Around 4% of all children in the Western world lose one or both parents before they reach the age of 18 (Pearlman et al., 2010). This means that, at any time, there are thousands of children in schools and kindergartens who have experienced the loss of a parent. Many children further experience the loss of siblings, close friends, and other relatives during their childhood and adolescence. Consequently, childhood bereavement is something most schools must deal with on a regular basis.

There is no one way for children to mourn, and there are no fixed phases for them to follow through their grief. Many factors determine grief reactions, including

who the child lost, the relationship between the child and the deceased, the child's personality, and the care environment supporting the child. Generally, reactions are stronger following a sudden loss than in the wake of an anticipated loss (Berg et al., 2016; Hamden et al., 2012). In addition, the resources and reactions of the family often significantly influence how children cope with long-term illness in the family (Holland, 2001; Mallon, 2010). Parent reactions notably influence young schoolchildren, whereas older students may react in a manner that reflects their understanding of the long-term consequences of losing a parent. If children are present when sudden death occurs or find the deceased themselves, the risk of traumatic reactions to the loss also increases (Christ et al., 2002).

It is important to acknowledge that, with the right support, the majority of bereaved children will do well in life despite experiencing a difficult loss. At the same time studies (e.g. Nielsen et al., 2012; Pham et al., 2018) indicate that nearly half of all bereaved children have experienced daily impairments to their daily functioning. Therefore, schools should make it a high priority to offer bereaved children support throughout the difficult experience of loss.

The death of a parent often leads to an acute crisis in the family, and studies have revealed a significant increase in psychological problems and diagnoses amongst bereaved children (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2016). Other studies have reported decreased school performance, social withdrawal, and behavioural problems in the wake of childhood bereavement (Brent et al., 2009; Nielsen et al., 2012). Clinically we know that well-known grief reactions, such as sadness and longing, increased anxiety and anger decrease over time but last longer than many adults expect (Dowdney, 2000). Children may also develop issues maintaining peer relationships because they experience that classmates forget the loss or ascribe little significance to it (Dyregrov, 2006; Lytje, 2016a).

As such, challenges following a loss are not simply confined to one area of the children's lives. Where the child goes, the grief follows. It is therefore highly important that school children are met by staff who can support their return in a good manner. This includes supporting classmates and friends on how to welcome the bereaved child back, how to talk about the loss and how to be a good friend when someone is mourning. Studies (e.g. Greeff & Human, 2004; Lytje, 2016b; Nielsen et al., 2012) have shown that having good relationships that can support the child following the loss can significantly reduce the challenges they experience in the aftermath.

In Scandinavia there has been a strong focus on schools offering such support. All authors of this article have worked with developing and reviewing these support systems. This has given us a good insight into what seems to work, both for the school staff and the bereaved children. In this article we aim to summarise the steps we believe are important to consider when encountering bereavement, and beneficial forms of support.

Reduced school performance

One of the significant challenges which can arise because of childhood bereavement is reduced school performance. Many teachers have reported that academic performance may decline following the loss of a family member. This notion has been supported in a large Danish cohort study, which uncovered that children who lose a parent in childhood have up to 26% less of a chance of acquiring a university degree (Høeg et al., 2018). In particular, students seem to struggle with concentration and memory issues, which can translate into learning difficulties (Dyregrov, 2006).

Reduced motivation might also affect school performance. If the deceased parent was the one who previously motivated the student, such support might suddenly no longer be there. In a time filled with grief the child themselves might not be able to compensate for this, leading to reduced school performance. The child might also be concerned with their own mortality, thinking, 'What is the point of spending so much energy on schoolwork when I could die tomorrow?' The remaining parent or parents are probably also dealing with their own grief symptoms or experiencing post-traumatic reactions. They might not have the resources to offer support in relation to schoolwork and more general care, which can also affect school performance.

Interference of intrusive memories or guilt feelings and fantasies about how the child could have changed what occurred are also common following a significant loss. These can disrupt concentration and hinder memorisation during school time also reducing the child's academic ability.

Intrusive memories can further disrupt concentration when doing schoolwork at home, hinder sleep, and thereby further weaken the child's ability to learn. In addition, sadness and longing for the deceased might complicate the thought processes of the bereaved child and result in a lack of energy. Processing the loss also takes mental energy and might, in addition to concentration and memory problems, interfere with learning capacity.

Socially, the bereaved child might also start to withdraw from relationships. They may avoid others because they do not know how to talk about the loss and fear how friends might react to the new life situation. This lack of communication can weaken collaboration during school activities and when doing homework with other students. Furthermore, it might be difficult to be motivated to perform at school, if the child feels their social life is falling apart.

As such, many factors can affect the child's ability to perform at school. However, a significant amount of these challenges can also be mitigated by good adult support and by having a structured response available when someone experiences loss.

How can schools offer support?

The modern-day school is one of the arenas where children spend most of their waking hours. These institutions also often act as bastions of security when other areas of a student's life change or become chaotic. Based on this trust, schools also need to develop their employees' capacity to provide support and to prepare them for encounters with students who have experienced life-threatening illness and death. Based on our research and experience working with bereaved children, we provide some guidelines for how to deal with such situations in the following section.

Before a loss

‘Sometimes we had to go straight into the hospice or hospital and such after school. Then there was simply no time for homework, and you could not concentrate.’ (Freja, 14 years old)

In the case of a severe, life-threatening illness, collaboration between the home and the school should be initiated as early as possible and before the expected loss. The school should ensure that both teachers and the child’s classmates are aware of the challenges that an affected student is facing. The school day of the affected student should be structured in a way that makes them feel supported and in a safe environment. During this time, the school should consider the following guidelines.

- Hope for the best – but plan for the worst possible scenario. The school should prepare a structured plan for what to do if the life-threatening illness ends with a death. Discuss and write down what actions will be needed and who is responsible for ensuring this is done. ‘Being responsible’ does not mean supporting the student alone, but being in charge of ensuring that the child receives the necessary and appropriate support. Also consider when certain steps and actions will need to be taken. A plan ensures that, if the loss does occur, the school can respond in a swift, effective, and thoughtful manner.
- Living with a parent with a life-threatening illness can create many worries and challenges in a school. Try to structure the school situation for the child in a way that accommodates these challenges and accepts that, for a time, the student might struggle with concentration and behaviour difficulties. The reactions of each child will be unique. It is important to be aware of this and structure support efforts to counter the challenges experienced by an individual child.
- Ensure that ongoing and frequent communication is established between the school and the home. Over the course of life-threatening illnesses, it is not uncommon for parents to undergo rapid changes in terms of their health. Not all families have the resources to provide updates about such changes since they are already under significant stress. It is advisable that educators and families make specific agreements regarding how the school and the home communicate. This approach helps the school stay aware of the family’s situation and thus adapt its supporting efforts if necessary.

The time immediately following a loss

It is the responsibility of the family to inform the school if a family member has died. However, sometimes a school might discover a loss in the form of a social media post or

even from television news before hearing from the family. If this occurs, the first step the school should take consists of confirming what has happened by contacting the family. Before initiating such contact, the school should consider which staff members know the child and the family best, as well as who has the most positive relationship with them. Based on this, the school can then decide who should act as the main point of contact between the family and the school. In this way, the school can avoid inadvertently having the family contacted by several different school officials in an already stressful time. During the first contact with the family, the following recommendations may prove useful.

- Explain that the school understands the significance of what has occurred and that it will do its utmost to provide the student with support in the time that follows.
- Before any meeting with the family, consider what the school can offer in way of support. During a crisis, such as a loss, it is easier to accept concrete offers of support, than responding to questions such as ‘What can we do to help you?’. Offers can include informing the parents of classmates and co-ordinating classmates’ attending the funeral together with adults to support them.
- Establish strong, positive collaboration with the student and family. Try to make sure that their wishes are heard in relation to how they would like the return to school to happen. Set up a meeting where this can be discussed in more detail.
- Remember that different families require different types of support. Coping ability varies, as does the social support that families can call upon. The assistance provided should take the needs of each particular family into account.
- Suggest that the student can return to school as soon as they want and that support will be provided in a way that allows them to participate in lessons and assignments, even under these difficult circumstances.
- ‘Walk’ the student through what will happen during the first days when they return. This will reduce the child’s uncertainty and fears regarding what might happen at school. Provide the student with the opportunity to comment on the ‘plan’ and suggest changes or support that they would like.
- Clarify rules for absence, exams, and so forth.

The difficult return to school

‘They should put themselves in our place. Just believe that we really would like to have some influence. After all, it’s all about our loss, so why should we not have any influence?’ (Sophie, 12 years old)

For younger children, the return to school can be relatively straightforward. Young children often yearn for teachers' care and attention when returning, whereas older children and adolescents may be afraid to stand out. Adolescents may experience a dilemma in that, on the one hand, they do not want to stand out, but at the same time they long to be seen in the new life situation they find themselves in. For such students it is often essential that the teacher follows the guidelines below.

- Do not make them stand out more than they are comfortable with (e.g. drawing attention to them by publicly asking them, 'How are you today?'). Make contact in an unobtrusive way that respects the child's privacy needs.
- In a discreet way, show that you understand what has happened and that you remember the loss the student has experienced. Bereaved students generally want to feel seen by their teachers and feel that their teachers understand that it can take a long time for them to recover from their grief.
- Work with the student and the class to create a shared understanding of what has happened, how it should be spoken of in class, and when it is acceptable to ask questions. This approach ensures that bereaved students do not have to deal with these dilemmas on their own and facilitates constructive interactions between bereaved students and their peers. If these dilemmas are not dealt with, other students may show relatively little understanding about the significance of what has occurred, which could leave bereaved students feeling isolated and alone with their grief.
- Ask the student about how they want to be approached by teachers in the school: 'Is it ok if I perhaps check up on you once a week to see how you are doing? I will try not to ask when everyone else is around.'
- Establish what the student is allowed to do if they become sad or have a reaction during a lesson. Is it ok to leave the class for a while? Can the bereaved student bring a friend? Such rules ensure that the student does not get 'stuck' struggling with negative emotions in the classroom without knowing what is acceptable in such situations.
- Be aware that, for a time, bereaved students may experience reduced concentration and there may well be increased absences from school. In the new and difficult life situation they are experiencing, it is understandable that they might arrive at school less organised or prepared than in the past. Moreover, staff need to be prepared to offer the bereaved child extra support at school for a significantly longer period.

Communication with peers

The first contact between the primary teacher/tutor and the student is very important on the road to ensuring

good collaboration between school and student. At this juncture, the student should have a say in how the class and others are informed about their loss. Educators should also encourage the student to participate, in some form, in explaining the loss to the class. Some students will want to tell the class themselves. For others, it is enough to be present and perhaps provide some additional information. Others will say nothing, and some might even prefer not to be present. The advantages of the student being present are that it helps them understand the 'shared history' in the class and grants them a sense of control in a life situation that can feel very chaotic.

Bereaved students often feel that their classmates are pulling away from them because they do not know what to say or do. Simple and practical guidance on how peers can help support a bereaved student can go a long way in counteracting withdrawal from the class. The following list provides some advice on how the bereaved student's peers can handle the situation more effectively.

- Initiate early contact with the bereaved student – do not avoid them.
- Show that you care; find time to spend with the person.
- Avoid contacting the bereaved solely out of curiosity about what occurred.
- Ask if the bereaved student wants to talk about what has happened. Some do not want to, but others will be happy to share their story and worries.
- Reactions to a loss vary. Many become sad, some react with anger, and others hide their reactions. Many experience grief longer than their friends expect. Show patience towards those who are struggling over a longer period of time.
- If your classmate says that they do not feel like talking about the loss, then that is fine. It is also ok for you to ask again another time.
- Suggest social activities such as sports, hanging out, going for a walk, and other activities that can offer your friend a break from their grief.
- Remember that, although it is important to be able to talk about difficult subjects, it is also important to talk about the topics you usually talk about. It can be an immense help for bereaved students to have friends that they can have fun with and who make them laugh. This provides them with a much-needed respite from their grief.

In addition, some statements should be avoided when talking to bereaved students. [Table 1](#) gives some examples and alternatives.

If the student does not want the loss to be spoken about

Some students might not want anything to be said – often the case if a parent has taken their own life. If possible,

Table 1. Statements to avoid and suggested alternatives:

Avoid saying	Alternative
'I know how you are feeling.'	'I do not think anyone can understand how you are truly feeling, but I will try to.'
'I have also experienced losing someone, so I know exactly how you are feeling.'	'I've also lost someone. It was some time ago, so it doesn't feel as painful today. However, maybe I can understand some of what you are going through.'
'It could have been a lot worse.'	
'You should not be thinking about it in that way.'	'It is understandable that you think like that, but it is important to also think about it in other ways.'
'Call me if there is anything I can do.'	'I will call you to see how things are going.'
'Are you okay?'	'You might feel that I ask you how things are going too often. If you think it is a bit too much, let me know.'

the best option is always to include the family. However, sometimes they might also be struggling with how to reach the child. The family might need support in this task as well. Here it is important to understand that when a child does not want the loss to be spoken of, it can be for many different reasons. Therefore, it is impossible to use the same strategy for all such situations. If a student does not want anything to be said – but everyone already knows – we recommend a staff member talks to the bereaved student about the consequences that this silence may have for them.

'I understand that you do not want us to say anything to the class, but the truth is that they already know what has happened. If we do not say anything to anyone, then, in the end, you end up not being aware of what they know. Sometimes untrue rumours also start circulating. If we from the school do not say anything about what really happened, then you might be faced with having to hear some of these rumours, and they can be very hurtful. Since a lot of people already know what has happened, we also have a responsibility to ensure that they have the support they need and know what is true and what is not. What we would like to tell them is...'

If the death has been featured in the media, it is even more important that rumours and misconceptions are confronted and put to rest. Our experience is that, in most cases, students do not want anything to be told to the other students because they fear the unknown. If the school takes the time to ensure that the student and family understand what will be communicated and why, they are much less likely to oppose such information being offered to teachers and peers.

In instances where the school administrators and educators feel that they have done everything they can but are still struggling to collaborate with the student and family, we recommend enlisting the support of specialists. This could include community workers, counsellors, bereavement support specialists, or psychologists.

When should the student return to school?

The school represents structure, continuity, and security during a crisis. At school, students have the comfort of their usual social environment, and the support of their best friends and classmates can make them feel accepted and safe during the difficult time following a loss. Experiences from our work with bereaved children suggest that an early return is preferable. However, this return should be organised and planned for, as described in this article. There is no contradiction between mourning and going to school. However, the school needs to provide room for the student to deal with their grief. Educators also need to ensure that they can provide education and support despite the emotional reactions and any concentration difficulties the student might experience. Students should be welcome to return to school before the funeral as well. Some students will not feel ready for this, but with the support provided by the school it is possible.

Some students may also struggle with their return to school, possibly because of concerns related to leaving their parents or younger siblings home alone, especially if a parent is not doing well. Students may also be afraid of how they themselves might react when they return to school. During initial talks with bereaved students, it is a good idea to ask if they have any such fears, allowing educators to more easily identify practical solutions for such worries. For instance, this could include making an agreement regarding what the student should do if they become sad on the first day, as well as who they can talk to about this. It may also entail extending support to the struggling parent.

Supporting the student over time

'You will miss this person for the rest of your life. You can still be mourning without being completely lost and crying. I am still grieving and thinking about the person I lost. Sometimes you can also be feeling okay

and think about the loss in a positive way for a while and then being sad again later ... it depends.'

(Siv, 15 years old)

The most difficult time for a grieving student does not always immediately follow the loss but may occur later on. Many bereaved students share the sentiment that the loss and pain they experience lasts much longer than the society around them believes. That often makes them feel different and alone with their grief. It is important to underscore that it is the student's experience of not feeling seen or understood that is essential, not whether there is support available to them or not.

The following section includes suggestions for how educators can provide useful follow-ups and help the student feel 'seen'.

Care and support

- Immediately following the loss, create a follow-up plan for the student. Make sure it is shared with all the student's teachers. Emphasise that teachers in contact with the student should have a shared understanding and attitude towards the student and be aware of how they prefer to be approached.
- During the first six months, consider arranging a monthly meeting to ensure that the school remains up to date regarding how the student is doing and issues can be dealt with as they arise.
- Allow the student to skip activities that bring unwelcome attention to them. Accept that they might be more passive than usual for some time following the loss.
- Allow the student to take time-outs and leave the classroom if needed.
- If a class is going to work with a topic related to death, serious illness, or trauma, make sure the student is told beforehand. Together, discuss whether the student should be present or perhaps do something else, even if considerable time has passed since the illness or death.
- Make sure you reach out to the student over time even if the initial offers of support were rejected.
- If educators witness the student withdrawing from peer and/or teacher relationship or displaying significant changes in behaviour (becoming very quiet or acting like a clown), they should take steps to ensure that the student receives counselling.
- When being witness to a child who displays anger or frustration, remember that often the child is not upset with you, but at what has occurred. Sometimes friends and teachers can also unknowingly trigger the anger if they say something that the child connects to the loss. Here, it is more important to deal with the reason the child is upset than any inappropriateness of the feelings being displayed. Comment on the anger and gently acknowledge that it is understandable that they are

angry after what has happened. It helps to put the anger into words but it is not acceptable to take the anger out on others or disrupt the school sessions.

- Be aware that grief is not linear and often fades away for some time, only to return with increased strength. This is especially the case during sensitive periods, such as graduation day, the anniversary of the death, or the birthday of the deceased. Recognising such days, talking with the student, and providing room for the student's grief can help the student significantly until life returns to normal.

Educational initiatives

- Stay up to date with the professional literature on bereavement in the school context.
- If the student is old enough to receive marks and complete examinations, then consider how to support the student if their grades start to drop.
- Do not provide feedback on absolutely all minor flaws, which may be demotivating.
- Accept that many bereaved students will experience issues related to concentration and memory. These can persist over time.
- If possible, reduce the pressure to achieve; view current grades in the context of how the student performed before the loss.
- If possible, let the student skip a test or assignment if they are overwhelmed by many assignments at one time.
- Explore if there are any special rules or support available to bereaved students in exam or test situations.
- If the student is an adolescent and seems to have become 'school tired', explore the possibilities of an internship outside the school or a period of leave.
- Map out any need for educational or pedagogical support.

Religious and cultural differences

In the same way as the personality, age and the developmental level of the child affect the support that should be provided, so do religious and cultural differences. While the grief and sorrow might be the same, it can come to show in different ways. Some cultures and religions might have specific mourning rituals and certain expected behaviours of the grieving. This could be a mother wearing a certain mourning dress, expected periods of mourning and burial ceremonies and rituals that might diverge from what you are used to.

It will be impossible to be aware of all these deviations and the specific practices of the bereaved family. We recommend that during one of your initial meetings with the family you ask whether there are any ceremonies or specific rituals that it might be good for the school to know. For younger children it is also important that you gain an understanding of what beliefs the family has. Is the deceased

in heaven, reincarnated or something entirely different? This can help you provide a foundation for a talk about beliefs and where the deceased has gone. If the child asks you where you think the deceased has gone, this is often because they want to examine own beliefs. Therefore, it is often better responding ‘that is a good question, what do you believe yourself?’ rather than imposing your views on the child.

Remember teacher strain and needs

‘It is about having courage. To provide good grief support, you need to have dealt with your own grief. You also need to have the courage to realise that here is a child suffering from massive grief. And I do agree that it is a difficult balance to find, because there are families who can handle it themselves and do not need us meddling. But it never becomes an excuse for not acting, if we say “The family told us they did not want help”, or “The boy said he did not want help”. Fine then we will just let it go.” (Danish teacher on her duties when meeting a bereaved child)

Supporting a child through a loss is a challenging task. You are confronted with a child who has lost one of the most significant people in their life. Having to talk to parents and the child about the loss and being the one in control and offering support is a difficult task for anyone. However, you might also be confronted with your own mortality and personal losses. These can interfere with your ability to support the child as well as bring back old and personal difficult memories and feelings. It is, therefore, highly important that no member of staff is asked to provide such support entirely on their own. While somebody needs to be the person responsible for the support, a colleague needs to be available to help this person. For staff members who have been through difficult losses themselves, it might be too difficult to be the primary person responsible for support. There is no shame in admitting this. However, if this is the case, your number one priority is to ensure that someone else fulfils this role.

Conclusion

For both teachers and schools, it is important to maintain perspective about what is happening at present while simultaneously considering how to provide long-term support to students. In this article, we have provided our perspectives on how this can be done and what needs to be considered. Thoughtful, effective follow-up routines and proper help from the school can promote the educational potential of the student and reduce the risks of negative development, isolation, and unhappiness. The help from

teachers who ‘see’ and support children in grief can have lifelong significance. ■

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