

Addressing Death & Grief with Students with Disabilities

In the event of a death in the community, it is important to consider the impact on students with disabilities. These individuals may grieve differently and may require additional assistance from teachers and parents. Often they may be confused about the changes around them, particularly if well-meaning people try to protect them from the truth or from others' displays of grief. **The following document provides general information about how to talk about death and grief with students with disabilities**

Grief in Individuals with Disabilities

- **Difficulty in learning or understanding.** For individuals with disabilities, it is important to talk to them about learning about death and the grieving process. Be aware that students with disabilities may misattribute the nature of the illness that their lost one had and think that they too will die of a similar illness.
- **Decreased or Altered Expression of Emotion.** Many of these individuals do not express their emotions in a "typical" manner. It is important to look for other indicators of their feelings, such as their behavior, as they may act out or revert to earlier behaviors as a means of grieving.
- **Tendency to Respond in a Positive Manner.** Some individuals may have a tendency to say yes to all questions being asked of them during the grieving process.

Behavior (Rather Than Words)

For these individuals, a change in behavior may show their reaction more than what they say. This may result in reverting to past behaviors or other acting out behaviors. It is important to monitor these behaviors and provide necessary assistance in supporting the student in the grieving process. Other behaviors to observe include:

- Changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits, or work productivity; withdrawal, and increase in complaints about pain or illness.

How to Help Your Student Cope

- **Talk honestly** about death with them in language they can easily understand and refrain from using euphemisms to describe death (e.g., passed away, no longer with us, etc.)
- **Take extra time** to talk with them about death and the person who has died. Help them work through their feelings and remember they may be looking to you for suitable behavior.
- **Share the sorrow.** Allow them – even encourage them—to talk about their feelings of loss and share memories of the deceased.
- **Don't offer false comfort.** It doesn't help the grieving person when you say "it was for the best" or "you'll get over it in time." Instead, offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen.
- **Be Patient.** Remember that it can take a long time to recover from a major loss. Make yourself available to talk.
- **Anticipate a lack of questions** or unrelated follow up questions. Allow some time to pass, and check in again, it is likely they simply needed time to process the information.

Grief Support

- There is great value in finding ways to memorialize the deceased individual, and individuals with disabilities should be given opportunities to attend funerals and participate in other rituals. Other strategies can include holding memorial services, as well as creating and maintaining memorial boards, walls, or gardens.
- **Encourage professional help when necessary.** Don't hesitate to contact mental health supports when you feel someone is experiencing too much pain to cope alone or has experienced symptoms for an extended period of time.

References

DeerOaks "Dealing with Grief and Loss"

Moralez, A. "Grief Among Individuals with Developmental Disabilities."