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Returning to School After a Suicide Loss: For Younger Children

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For guidance on supporting a teen's return to school following a suicide loss, click [here](#).

Starting a new school year often creates apprehension in children. Children wonder what their new teacher will be like, what their classmates might be like, and if they will make new friends. But when a child has had a death in his or her family - particularly a loss by suicide - these concerns are often magnified. Children's lives are already in a state of change and upheaval. Beginning a new school year under these circumstances can be challenging for these children, as well as the entire family.

How can parents best help children as they return to school? One of the primary things parents and caregivers can do is to open a dialogue with children about returning to school. This gives the child an opportunity to express how they're feeling and any concerns they have. Some children might not want to talk about their loss or their feelings about returning to school. These children might prefer to use art as a way of expressing what they're thinking and feeling. Other children might express themselves through high-energy activities such as sports or other types of play. Allowing them to express themselves in different ways and creating an environment of openness and acceptance will help children as they tackle their worries and concerns about going back to school.

Another thing to consider when children are returning to school is their reactions to the loss. Common grief reactions that kids might have after someone dies from suicide include feeling shocked, being angry, and feeling numb. Kids often experience confusion, guilt, and intense sadness after losing someone close to them from suicide. Additionally, they are sometimes anxious that something else might happen to them or their family. Having an awareness of these common grief reactions and knowing how to help enables parents to better support their children as they navigate going back to school. Understanding, reassurance, and patience by the adults in their lives all help to normalize what children are feeling and coping with.

TELLING THE TEACHER

Parents often wonder what and how much to tell the new teacher when their child returns to school in this situation. Sometimes children don't want anyone to know about their loss, but it's important to bear in mind that teachers need to know enough to be able to support the child. If teachers aren't informed, they may be caught off guard if the child gets upset in

class. If the loss occurred in the previous school year, then it is possible that the teacher from the previous grade has already had a conversation with the new teacher.

LANGUAGE TO USE

Parents can aid children by talking with them about what to say when questions arise regarding their loss. When having this conversation, parents should try to model language in ways their children can use when questions come up. If a child chooses to disclose that someone has died, having the language will help them to talk about it. To assist with this, parents can give children a few examples of what they might say. For example, if a child's sister died, he or she could say, "She died because she took her own life." Or, if a child's father died of suicide and had struggled with depression, the child may say, "My father died from depression." By giving children examples of what they might say, parents or caregivers empower the child to talk about their loss openly, just as they might if someone in their family had died from cancer, a car accident, or a heart attack.

COME UP WITH A SAFETY PLAN

Another important thing for both parents and teachers to be aware of is that children often have trouble focusing or concentrating after a death of someone in their life. This lack of concentration at home and at school is one of the most common ways that grief impacts children. Sometimes children are preoccupied with thoughts such as, "Why should school matter anymore?" following the death. It is crucial for parents to establish an understanding, and plan with their child's teacher or the school counselor for how their child will be supported if they are sad or upset during class. This plan could be for the child to have the option to sit quietly in the classroom reading a book or drawing, or it could include going to the school counselor's office to talk with the counselor. It is important for the child to know what the plan is in advance. This will help to ease his or her worry if they do get emotional during class.

CHECK IN

Once the child returns to school, parents should check in with them about how school is going. This check-in could occur any time: directly after school, after dinner, or even later in the evening. Sometimes children will open up more when it's nearing bed time. Parents and caregivers can encourage children to cope with their feelings in a variety of different ways. Some children cope by spending time with family and friends, playing a sport, listening to

music, or playing outside. Others might cope by spending time on the computer or playing video games. Some children cope by creating art or watching a movie.

LIST OF SUPPORT

One more way parents can assist children before going back to school after a loss is to help them make a list of all the people they can turn to for support - both at home and at school. Knowing there are people who will be there for them will help to provide reassurance and comfort when the child returns to school.

For more information on how to support children and teens following a suicide loss, see AFSP's [Children, Teens, and Suicide Loss booklet](#), written in partnership with the [Dougy Center, The National Center for Grieving Children & Families](#).

Schools seeking best practices for healing after a suicide loss in their community can look to AFSP's [After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#), produced in collaboration with the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#).

Dr. Pamela Gabbay is a childhood bereavement consultant and part of the national Training Corps for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Formerly, Dr. Gabbay was the Director of the Mourning Star Center for Grieving Children and served as Camp Director for a bereavement camp for children in Palm Springs, CA. She also served two terms on the Board of Directors of the National Alliance for Grieving Children. Dr. Gabbay served as the President of the Southern California Chapter of the Association for Death Education and Counseling. She is the co-author, along with Andy McNiel, of *Supporting and Understanding Bereaved Children: A Practical Guide for Professionals*. Dr. Gabbay is also a co-owner of The Satori Group, an organization that provides education and consultation to the death, end-of-life, and bereavement fields. The Satori Group's website is www.TheSatoriGroup.org. Dr. Gabbay may be reached at Pamela.Gabbay@TheSatoriGroup.org.

Check back later this week for a related piece by Dr. Gabbay focused on supporting teens headed back to school after a loss.

Comments