

Supporting a Grieving Child

A Teacher's Handbook

Practical, faith-grounded guidance for holding space with children ages 4 and up as they move through loss, change, and grief.

Your Most Important Role

You don't need the right answers — you need to show up. Grief comes in many shapes, and it doesn't always look like the loss of a life. A child moving away, a family divorcing, a pet dying, a move to a new town, a new school — all of these are real losses, and children grieve them in real ways. Acknowledging what a child is going through, in an age-appropriate and unhurried way, tells them your classroom is a safe place to feel what they feel. Children notice when adults avoid hard things. Don't avoid this.

Common Grief Scenarios

Grief shows up in classrooms far more often than we realize. This handbook applies to situations such as:

- The death of a loved one — a parent, grandparent, sibling, or relative
- The death of a pet
- Parents' separation or divorce
- A close friend moving away
- The child's own family moving to a new home or city
- Changing schools and leaving a familiar community
- A classmate's or staff member's death
- Other significant life changes: a parent's deployment, incarceration, job loss, or serious illness in the family

The details differ, but the underlying task is the same: a child is adjusting to a world that looks different than it did before. The guidance below applies broadly, with notes on where a specific scenario calls for something different.

What Grief Looks Like in Children

- Grief impairs concentration, memory, and motivation — this is normal, not defiance or laziness
- Some children grieve loudly; others go quiet — both are valid
- A child who seems "fine" may be the one struggling most
- Grief doesn't move in a straight line — a child may be playful one moment and tearful the next
- Anniversaries, holidays, and reminders (a school project about family, a lesson on pets) can resurface grief unexpectedly
- Children re-grieve losses as they grow and understand them differently at each developmental stage

Supporting Younger Children — Ages 4–9

How grief shows up at this age

- Limited understanding that death or major loss is permanent — may ask the same question repeatedly
- Grief often shows up in behavior and the body, not words: tummy aches, clinginess, tantrums, regression (thumb-sucking, bedwetting)
- Magical thinking is common — a child may believe they caused the loss ("I was mad at my dog and now he's gone")
- Play is often how young children process — dolls, blocks, or drawing may reenact the loss
- Short attention span for grief — a child may cry hard, then ask to go play, and that is completely normal

What to do

Do this	Avoid this
• Use simple, honest, concrete words ("died," "moved away," "won't live here anymore") rather than euphemisms like "went to sleep" or "went away," which can confuse or frighten young children • Answer the same question as many times as it's asked — repetition is how young children process • Keep routines as predictable as possible — predictability is comforting during upheaval • Offer simple choices to restore a sense of control ("Do you want to draw or read?") • Use books, drawing, and play to help the child express what they can't yet say in words • Reassure the child, clearly and often, that the loss is not their fault • Give brief, warm physical comfort if the child seeks it and it's appropriate	• Euphemisms that a literal-minded child may take at face value ("lost," "put to sleep," "passed away") • Long or abstract explanations • Assuming a dry-eyed or playful child isn't grieving • Forcing a child to talk about it before they're ready • Making promises you can't keep ("Nothing bad will ever happen again") • Punishing regressive behavior — treat it as a signal, not misbehavior

Scenario notes for younger children

- Death of a pet: Take it seriously — for many young children, a pet is their first experience of death and their grief is genuine, not "less than."
- Divorce or separation: Reassure the child often that both parents still love them and the divorce is not their fault; avoid asking a child to "pick sides" or share details about either parent.
- A friend moving away: Help the child mark the friendship (a card, a drawing, a photo) rather than treating the loss as too small to acknowledge.
- Changing schools or moving: Give the child a concrete way to say goodbye to the old classroom or routine, and a concrete way to learn what's ahead.

Supporting Older Children — Ages 10 and Up

How grief shows up at this age

- A fuller understanding that loss is permanent, which can bring more intense sadness, anger, or anxiety

- Greater self-consciousness — many older children and teens grieve privately to avoid standing out
- Grief may surface as irritability, withdrawal, risk-taking, or a drop in academic performance rather than visible sadness
- Peer relationships matter enormously — a student may lean on friends more than adults, or isolate from both
- Big "why" questions and existential thinking often emerge — about fairness, faith, and mortality
- Some students become caretakers for grieving friends or siblings and quietly carry a heavy load

What to do

Do this	Avoid this
• Acknowledge the loss directly and briefly, then let the student set the pace for how much they want to say • Offer structured outlets — journaling, art, or small-group reflection — rather than open-ended "share your feelings" moments, which can feel exposing • Suspend academic pressure and offer extensions without requiring the student to ask individually • Create a quiet, low-key way for a student to step out if they need a moment • Check in privately and consistently, even weeks after others have moved on • Coordinate with colleagues so the student receives consistent messaging across classes	• Proceeding with class as if nothing happened • Singling the student out in front of peers • Telling a student how they should feel or how long grief should take • Grading aggressively or enforcing normal deadlines in the first weeks • Assuming a student who seems "fine" or high-functioning isn't struggling • Trying to answer every hard "why" question with certainty

Scenario notes for older children

- Death of a loved one: Give the student agency over how (or whether) their classmates are told, and coordinate with the counselor and family on messaging.
- Divorce or separation: Watch for a student quietly taking on adult responsibilities at home; don't assume older children are less affected just because they understand more.
- A friend moving away or changing schools: These losses are often minimized by adults but can be genuinely destabilizing for a teen's identity and social world — treat them with real weight.
- Death of a pet: Don't assume older students have "outgrown" this grief — a pet can represent years of stability, especially through other family changes.

Warning Signs — When to Refer to a Counselor

Refer immediately if you observe any of these:

Sudden withdrawal — a previously engaged student goes silent or absent

Hopeless statements — "What's the point," "I don't want to be here"

Sleep deprivation — falling asleep in class, extreme irritability

Prolonged inability to function — can't complete any work weeks after the loss
Signs of trauma — flashbacks, panic, avoidance of triggers
Caretaker collapse — a student holding others up while visibly breaking down

Never manage a mental health crisis alone. Your role is to notice and refer — not to assess or treat. Tell the counselor what you observed specifically: "Jaylen said 'I don't see the point' twice today." Specifics help.

Grief Doesn't Follow the Calendar

First weeks	Weeks and months ahead
• Acknowledge the loss or change directly, once, without making a spectacle of it • Suspend grading pressure where appropriate • Loop in the counselor and, if relevant, the family • Keep routines steady	• Continue watching for warning signs after the initial support fades • Check in around anniversaries, birthdays, and reminders • Allow creative expression to continue • Gradually restore normal expectations at the student's pace

SDA Faith and the Classroom

Open space for honest faith rather than easy answers. Psalms 22, 34, and 46 offer language for grief that does not rush to resolution. Let students bring hard "why" questions without forcing a theological answer too quickly. The resurrection hope of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 can be a genuine comfort when offered gently — but it should anchor grief, not shortcut it. Whether the loss is a death, a divorce, or a move, faith can hold space for both lament and hope at once.

If you are personally affected by a student's loss or a change happening in your own life: you are allowed to grieve too. Briefly acknowledging your own feelings models healthy grief for students. Connect with a colleague or your school's support system — you cannot pour from an empty vessel.

You Are Not Alone in This

Connect with your school counselor, administration, and your conference's pastoral or family ministries team. Support is available for you as well as for your students.

Crisis support for students or staff

Call or text 988 — available 24/7