

Supporting Children After a Parent's Suicide

Wilson, S., Heath, M. A., Wilson, P., Cutrer-Parraga, E. A., Coyne, S. M., & Jackson, A. P. (in press). Survivors' perceptions of support following a parent's suicide. *Death Studies*. doi: 10.1080/07481187.2019.1701144

- Build rapport with the child by focusing on the individual child's interests and preferences. Be a consistent, caring adult.
- Customize your response to the child's unique situation, needs, and developmental age. Involve them in making choices (e.g., how they want to participate in the wake/funeral, when they are ready to return to school, and when and how they want to talk about the death, etc.).
- Using age-appropriate explanations, accurately describe what happened. "He died." "Her body doesn't work anymore." "His brain wasn't working right." "Her emotional pain made it hard to see other options."
- Use honest phrases like "completed suicide" or "died by suicide."
- Send the message that it's okay to talk about the suicide. Create a safe space where the child can discuss his/her concerns—as he/she is comfortable. Invite the child to talk, but also provide activities to express and process feelings.
- Typically, you may need to begin with general discussions about feelings before moving to loss, death, and suicide. Once discussing "heavier" topics, do not prolong the conversation. Take time to end the conversation/counseling session with a positive activity and conversation that provides emotional support. Assure the child that you are available to talk as needed.
- Reach out to the family, letting them know you support them. Offer practical assistance to support parent and children. Encourage parent to take care of their own needs, including emotional needs.
- Work with the school and religious leaders to support the child (cards made by peers, identify caring adults and a "safe place" in school/church to go when sad, etc.).
- Carefully select books. Prior to sharing the book with the child, read the book and consider if the book meets the child's needs. Then, read and discuss the book together. Consider the length of the book and the possibility of breaking the book into chunks and reading it across multiple visits.
- At some point in the future, encourage and facilitate ways to memorialize the loved one (artwork, memory box, photo album, cemetery visits, etc.).
- To process the suicide, work within the child/family values, consider the family's religious/spiritual beliefs.
- Find ways to help the child work through feelings of blame, shame, "it's my fault," and feelings of isolation. Suicide is *never* the child's fault.
- Frequently "check in" with the child. Be consistent and available. Let them know you care.
- Be mindful of anniversaries; holidays, such as Mother's and Father's Day; special occasions, and birthdays.

Regher, L., Heath, M. A., Jackson, A. P., Nelson, D., & Cutrer-Parraga, E. A. (in press). Storybooks to facilitate children's communication following parental suicide: Paraprofessional counselors' perceptions. *Death Studies*.

The following books were ranked as the “best choices” to facilitate communication with child survivors of a parent suicide

- *Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide* by Linda Goldman
- *After A Suicide: A Workbook for Grieving Kids* by the Dougy Center
- *Luna's Red Hat: An Illustrated Storybook to Help Children Cope with Loss and Suicide* by Emma Smid
- *Where Are You? A Child's Book About Loss* by Laura Olivieri
- *Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping with the Loss of a Parent* by Julie Kaplow and Donna Pincus
- *Someone I Love Died by Suicide: A story for Children Survivors and Those Who Care for Them* by Doreen Cammarata
- *In My Heart* by Jo Witek
- *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss

Focus Group Recommendations:

Important Things to Consider When Selecting a Book to Open Communication with Child Survivors of a Parent Suicide

- Carefully consider the individual child's experience and current needs.
- Use simple stories that convey concrete, honest facts through words and metaphors easily understood by the child.
- More specific books, those that mention suicide specifically, do a better job of addressing and normalizing the harsh reality that these children face.
- Consider starting with non-grief specific books as a way to introduce different emotions and help give children tools for how to recognize and deal with their emotions.
- Keep information and therapeutic activities developmentally appropriate for the child.
- Pay attention to the illustrations and how the child might interpret what things look like (strange and “creepy” illustrations, red watercolor effects that could trigger images of blood, etc.).
- Utilize books with an animal or pet in the story. It is easier for children to talk about displaced feelings, such as talking about how an animal would feel in their situation.
- Take caution when considering stories that leave things unresolved, such as in the book *Rabbityness* and *A Terrible Thing Happened*. When information is ambiguous and unclear, this leaves children feeling unsettled.
- Utilize the parent or counselor guide at the back of the book (if one is included).

Strategies to Address Challenges Children Face Following a Family Member's Death

Challenges	Strategies to address challenges
Feeling isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure: <i>We are here for you. You are not alone.</i> • Encourage a sense of community by including classroom and small group activities. Activities should encourage student expression, foster friendships, and create sense of belonging. • Classroom memorials provide students the opportunity to offer compassionate responses (cards, drawings, posters, flowers, poems, etc.). • Encourage conversations and strengthen connection with the deceased. Reassure children that deceased loved ones live on in our memories.
Expressing loss of hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with surviving parent or guardian about family spiritual beliefs and their approach to grieving and memorializing/remembering the deceased. Incorporate these beliefs into conversation and activity. • Share the “sea glass” analogy (Heath & Sheen, 2005, p. 121). • Share and display positive quotes and pictures. • Plant paperwhite bulbs (a type of Narcissus bulb). Explain that although these bulbs are brown and shriveled, these bulbs will grow into flowers. Paperwhites “force bloom” indoors (no chilling or direct sunlight required). Flowers mature in 4-6 weeks.
Blaming self or others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure children that self-blame is a common feeling. Assure and reiterate: <i>It is not your fault.</i> • Blame holds children in an unproductive victim's role. Empower those who grieve by offering supportive classroom activities that encourage emotional expression, steering energy into positive productive avenues. • Practice reframing negative comments into positive self-talk.
Avoiding conversations about death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caution: Although opportunities for discussion should be offered, never coerce a child to talk about death or to express their feelings associated with death. • Select a children's book that models coping strategies for working through grief. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For young children (ages 4-8), <i>Chester Raccoon and the Acorn Full of Memories</i> (Penn, 2009) models how to memorialize a loved one's death. ○ For older children and adolescents (ages 8 and older), <i>Tear Soup</i> (Schwiebert & DeKlyen, 2005) describes working through one's grief.
Asking tough questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When young children (ages 4-8) ask questions about death, sensitively and honestly respond to their questions. <i>When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death</i> (Brown, 1998) addresses a wide variety of children's questions in a non-emotional straightforward manner. • For children ages 9-12, <i>Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss</i> (Mundy, 1998) offers sensitive, supportive responses.
Acting out and/or regressing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show extra patience, take time to listen. • Teach and encourage relaxation skills. Practice relaxation with entire class: Slowly inhale a deep breath, then counting to 5, slowly exhale. • As needed, reduce academic demands and provide flexibility in regular routines. • Discuss behavioral concerns with school psychologist/counselor/social worker.

Information based on Heath, M. A., & Cole, B. V. (2012). Strengthening classroom and teachers' emotional support for children following a family member's death. *School Psychology International*, 33(3), 243-262. doi: 10.1177/0143034311415800

Ideas for Grief Activities

NOTE: These activities were provided by Stephanie Steele (The Sharing Place, SLC, UT) and research participants. Activities were included in Bergeson's thesis <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ETD/id/3441>

MEMORIALIZING ACTIVITIES

- Memory blocks on the wall- w/school supplies
- Planting bulbs in honor of the deceased
- Stepping stones made with found objects with names or messages
- Rock garden in honor of the deceased
- Stained glass window made out of tissue paper/contact paper to hang in memory of the deceased
- Silly string the person's name on cement or other surface
- Prayer flags made with paper (sprayed with "bio colors") and hang outside. When it rains, the water washes the prayer to the person
- Memory boxes—filled with mementos, poems, cards, private thoughts, etc.
- Decorate and stuff pillows to help remember the deceased
- Create a paper chain of memories (can be built over months or even color coded by season)
- Pipe cleaner sculpture to memorialize the deceased
- Hearts made from colored telephone wire

ACTIVITIES TO ELICIT DISCUSSION OF MEMORIES OR FEELINGS

- Throwing yarn into webs of grief by asking questions about the deceased with each throw
- Stringing a bead necklace—talk about one memory per bead
- Distribute a box of Band-aids and have the child put a Band-aid on a spot that "hurts" because of the death
- Write "Grocery list" of the deceased, listing their favorite things they would get if they were shopping for groceries
- Starburst roulette—each color of starburst is assigned a theme or topic prompt. When the student draws a starburst, they share a corresponding thought or memory to that color's theme (especially good as an ice breaker activity).
- "Jenga"—for each piece removed, share a memory or something about the deceased. This activity is also good to see how students cope with something they've created being destroyed and can facilitate a discussion about anger
- Simply talking about the "things I remember or things I liked best about..."

ACTIVITIES FOR EXTERNALIZERS

- Throw ice cubes at signs that say "I hate death!"
- Line the bottom and sides of a shoebox with paper. Place marbles and some paint inside and have the student shake the marbles around in the box. Relieves anger or pent-up emotion and is fun for kids to create
- Button box, rice box, sand box to relieve anxiety (button box creates less of a mess!)
- Shaving cream finger painting
- Throw tennis balls dipped in paint against white paper on a wall
- Throwing cotton balls

ACTIVITIES TO MAINTAIN A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DECEASED

- Painting with water on the sidewalk—writing memories or messages they want to share, which evaporate and disappear
- Origami with messages, things left unsaid, or recent news they would like to convey
- Fold a paper in half lengthwise and compare/contrast the differences/similarities between the child and the deceased
- Large metal board with magnets that can be arranged to write messages or thoughts
- Insert an imaginary letter into a helium-filled balloon and let it float away in the sky

ACTIVITIES THAT ADDRESS DEATH-RELATED CHALLENGES

- Charades about end-of-life issues (for older kids)
- Grief time line—from first encounter with death of just of memories
- Gluing body rock people (requires patience)
- Have them do a puzzle that has a missing piece—creates a metaphor/discussion starter to make a connection that sometimes all things seem to be going well, but you can't see that one piece is missing. Even if you make a new piece and replace it, it isn't the same as the original.
- “Sorry” and other games that correlate with other real life experiences
- Set up a project for collaboration (i.e., drawing on each others' pictures) where they can choose when to switch
- Grow grass inside of a plastic soda bottle—This allows students to see the life/death cycle clearly

ACTIVITIES THAT VALIDATE

- Make a list of stupid things that people say
- Making a talking stick with a ribbon—each member has the opportunity to contribute
- Website or personal journal (i.e., The Sharing Place newsletters) with things they wished they said before the person died
- Role Playing to prepare the child to re-enter school

TIPS and THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Tip: For the first appointment, have them draw a picture of themselves, family, etc. to help see where they are in the grief process
- Tip: It is helpful to establish ground rules before talking about grief and loss that cover issues such as confidentiality, no put downs, etc., with a clear emphasis that all understand that there is not grief or loss bigger than another
- Tip: Don't say “Sorry.” Instead change it to “I'm sorry you had to experience that.”
- Tip: Give them something to hold in their hands or fidget with to help them relieve anxiety
- Tip: It is helpful to have students draw pictures of the deceased instead of bringing actual photographs, which might hit too close to home
- Tip: Talking square-on or face-to-face can be intimidating to kids. Talking while working on a project together or sitting more side-by-side
- Remember: Keep an open dialogue so the child knows it's okay to discuss their feelings any time
- Remember: There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and the grief process never ends completely. It is important to know that something that happened a long time ago can be manifested in emotions and actions
- Remember: Most activities should promote talking, expression, and group building

SEA GLASS

Heath & Sheen, 2005, p. 121

Metaphor: Sea Glass

Purpose: Putting painful feelings and memories into perspective, giving hope for the future.

Suggestion: Purchase sea glass from a craft store. Tell the story to a classroom of children. After telling the story, pass a piece of the sea glass around the classroom. Leave a piece of sea glass on the teacher's desk as a reminder of this story.

Does anyone know what sea glass is? If you walk along an ocean shore, you will find sea glass. The ocean water and sand work together, gradually smoothing the sharp and jagged edges of broken glass. Over time, the glass becomes smooth and rounded on the edges. The glass is still there, but the edges no longer cut. Sometimes bad things happen. It makes our hearts sad. We hurt. We may be angry. These are strong feelings. You may wonder if they will ever go away. Broken glass is like your feelings. Right after the glass is broken, the sharp edges can cut and hurt you. Your feelings hurt. They feel sharp and jagged. Over time and with the support of others, the edges of your feelings become smooth and rounded. Even though the memory stays in your heart, it becomes softer. In the future, you will be able to think about what happened and it won't hurt as much as it does right now.