

SUPPORTING A BEREAVED STUDENT



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Around 1 in 20 Australian children will experience the death of a parent before they turn 18. This number does not include children grieving the death of a sibling, caregiver, or extended family member.

Grief can also arise from non-death experiences, such as family separation, illness, or other major changes. Every child's grief is unique and deserves to be recognised and supported with compassion.

COMMON CHALLENGES STUDENTS FACE

Grief impacts all parts of a student's life including emotionally, physically, socially, cognitively, and behaviourally.

In the classroom, this often shows up as:

- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness
- Tiredness, headaches, disrupted sleep
- Withdrawal, irritability, or acting out
- Falling behind in schoolwork
- Feeling different, isolated, or at risk of bullying

Students may fall behind in their learning, especially in the first 1–2 years after the death. Teenagers, in particular, may question the relevance of school when everything else feels meaningless or unstable.

However, not all students struggle academically. Some students overachieve to gain a sense of control or escape the pain. This, too, can be a concern. If a high-achieving student later experiences failure, it can trigger deep feelings of helplessness.

CARING FOR YOURSELF

Supporting a grieving student can bring up strong emotions, especially if it reminds you of your own experiences of grief or loss. This is normal. Take time to notice your feelings and seek support if you need it. Looking after yourself helps you be the supportive, compassionate steady adult your students need.

BY AGE AND STAGE

Every child grieves differently, and their grief can change as they grow. Grief is not a one-time event but something children may revisit at different points in their life. The points below are general patterns that might be observed in some children, but each child's experience is unique.

0 - 5 YEARS

- Grieve through behaviour and play (clinginess, regression, tantrums)
- Need consistent routines, honest words ("died" not euphemisms), and lots of reassurance

6 - 11 YEARS

- Begin to understand permanence of death
- May express grief through behaviour, play, or big emotional reactions
- Often feel "different" from peers

12 - 18 YEARS

- Intense emotions combined with teenage changes
- May withdraw, act out, or take risks
- Peer acceptance is important; they may hide grief or overshare online
- Benefit from respect, trust, and safe adults to talk to

IMPACT OF SIGNIFICANT DATES AND MILESTONES

Important dates such as the anniversary of the death, their Important Person's birthday, their own birthday, or events like Mother's Day and Father's Day can be especially hard.

- Students may become more withdrawn or overwhelmed
- Physical health can decline (more susceptible to colds, flu, or fatigue)
- Attendance may dip during these times
- Even 5 or 10 years later, these dates can still have a big emotional impact



Grief is lifelong and re-emerges at key milestones or as the child's understanding of life and death deepens.

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RISKS AND VULNERABILITY TO BULLYING

- Bereaved students may feel different, which can lead to isolation.
- Some peers may make unkind comments about their Important Person or minimise their grief.
- In some cases, students may even be encouraged to harm themselves to “join” the person who died. This kind of behaviour is harmful and must be taken seriously.

Belonging, safety, and connection at school are essential protective factors for grieving children and teenagers.

THINGS TO AVOID

*(as suggested by children and young people)

- Avoid comparing grief: saying “I know how you feel” or sharing your own story of loss can feel dismissive.
- Avoid making assumptions: not every child will cry, talk, or express their grief in expected ways.
- Don’t single them out in class: avoid public comments or unnecessary attention that might embarrass them.
- Don’t use clichés: phrases like “everything happens for a reason” or “time heals all wounds” these can feel empty or hurtful.
- Avoid pretending nothing has happened: it can make their grief feel invisible.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Acknowledgement and Connection

- Acknowledge their grief: use the Important Person’s name when appropriate
- Check in privately: away from peers
- Encourage belonging: remind them they are valued members of the class
- Notice interests: join their world, play, or talk about what they enjoy
- Show genuine care: simple gestures like remembering dates or asking how they are can mean a lot

Flexibility and Choice

- Offer flexibility: with deadlines, assessments, participation
- Provide choice: allow students to opt out or modify activities like family trees or Mother’s/Father’s Day
- Respect coping styles: some students need distraction, others need space for expression
- Give safe options: provide a break card or a quiet space when emotions feel overwhelming

Structure and Safety

- Maintain structure with some flexibility: too much or too little can be overwhelming
- Keep promises: trust is important
- Maintain predictability: routines provide comfort during uncertainty
- Create a safe classroom culture: address any bullying, encourage kindness and inclusion

Communication and Understanding

- Use clear language: words like “died” are honest and less confusing than euphemisms
- Listen more than you speak: allow them to share when they are ready
- Be patient with academic changes: grief affects concentration and memory
- Acknowledge significant dates: anniversaries, birthdays, and Mother’s/Father’s Day may need extra sensitivity
- Model openness: it’s okay to acknowledge sadness without needing to “fix” it