



*By Linda Goldman, MS*

# helping the *grieving* child in school

**E**ducators and students can exist in a healthier living and learning environment by acknowledging the special needs of the grieving child. Foremost is the complex relationship between loss issues and a child's ability to function in and out of the classroom. The needs of the grieving child must be addressed in a new and fresh way within our school systems to create a safe haven for learning for our young people.

Children's grief should be seen as an ongoing life process that is approachable through words, activities, nonverbal communication and accountability. Educators can use this understanding to create a safe environment for parents, teachers and children to acknowledge and process difficult feelings.



their outer and inner worlds. Issues involving shame and secretiveness when death is caused by such occurrences as suicide and the contraction of AIDS create fear, isolation and loneliness, which can be far more damaging than the original loss. Natural disasters ranging from earthquakes to tornadoes wreak havoc involving death and destruction of property. Family issues in our modern world including adoption, divorce, immigration, deployment and imprisonment reflect, for so many young people, family loss through separation.

### Normal signs of grief

Today's educators first need to become familiar with the common signs of grief in order to normalize them for parents and students. We then can develop ways to work with the grieving child within the school system.

Sophie was a fourth-grade client whose dad had died of suicide on her birthday. During our grief therapy session, she explained her rage at her teacher, Mrs. Martin. Sophie had told her the first week of school that her father had committed suicide over the summer. Mrs. Martin never responded to her and never addressed the subject again. Sophie was furious and swore never to tell anyone else in school about this death.

I asked Sophie what she wished her teacher had said. She replied, "I wish she would have given me a hug, said she was sorry and promised she would be there if I ever wanted to talk about my dad or the way he died."

Educators can develop ways to normalize and discuss these delicate subjects with children.

### Normalizing grief

Educators need to understand that children don't like to feel different. When they have experienced the death of a parent, they sometimes choose not to talk about it. Not talking about the death allows some kids to feel control over normalizing their life.

Tyler was playing on the school basketball team, and the final tournament was a major event. Most of the moms and dads of the team members came to support their children for the game. Tyler scored

the final basket that won the victory for his team. Charlie, Tyler's coach, ran over to Tyler to congratulate him, and all the other boys and their parents joined in the celebration.

"Where's your dad?" Coach Charlie asked. "He's working today, and couldn't come," Tyler replied. Coach Charlie was unaware that Tyler's dad had died of cancer three months earlier. Tyler needed to save face and avoid his dad's death in order to "appear normal."

### Normalizing grief response for children

It is common for grieving children to:

- ♦ Imitate behavior of the deceased
- ♦ Want to "appear normal"
- ♦ Need to tell the story over and over again
- ♦ Enjoy wearing or holding something of their loved one
- ♦ Speak of their loved one in the present tense
- ♦ Tend to worry about the health of their surviving loved ones

If the school had a policy of maintaining a "grief and loss inventory (Life and Loss, 2nd edition, pp. 125-129)," Coach Charlie could have reviewed this tool for all of his students in order to identify Tyler as a grieving child. The school guidance counselor could serve as a liaison to identify grieving children to all faculty members who currently work with them.

### Grief and ADD, LD

Often children can be misdiagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and learning disabilities after their experience with traumatic grief and loss. Hyperactivity, distractibility, impulsivity and inability to concentrate are common grief symptoms that too often become the behavioral criteria to diagnose learning problems.

Seven-year-old Sam was a second grader whose older sister Sally was murdered in a drive-by shooting the day before Christmas. He came back to school after the winter holidays with extreme restlessness and frequent swings of emotional outbursts and withdrawal. This continued for several months along with a decrease in attention and school performance. The behaviors

### Grief in today's world

So often, adults rely on the prevailing myth that children are too young to grieve. When a child is capable of loving, he is capable of grieving. Yet many of today's children are born into a world of grief issues that await them both inside and outside of their homes. Girls and boys are becoming increasingly traumatized by these prevailing social and societal loss issues in their homes, in their schools and in their communities.

A major percentage of our children globally face the loss of the protection of the adult world, as grief-related issues of homicide, violence and abuse infiltrate

continued well into third grade, where Sam's teacher expressed, concern that he might be exhibiting signs of ADD. She suggested to his mom that Sam receive an evaluation by his pediatrician.

Sam was placed on Ritalin for quite some time, but he continued to have the nightmares and bed-wetting that began with his sister's death. Sam had become a part of the learning disabled population, and his deep grief and its symptoms remained buried.

Artwork can be used as a grief therapy tool to help children recognize unresolved grief feelings and buried or frozen blocks of emotion. Sam eventually joined a school-based grief therapy group, attending for several months with four other children between the ages of 6 and 9, led by his guidance counselor. Children made memory books, commemorating loved ones, and shared photos and stories. Gradually, Sam's concentration in school became more focused; eventually, he was taken off the medication. He continued going to a children's bereavement group in a neighboring hospice program for the rest of the school year.

We, as caring adults, need to be educated in learning the common signs associated with the complexities of grief and trauma. Gaining an understanding of many feelings including anger, anxiety and depression that occur with bereavement can be a crucial tool in differentiating between grief-related issues and ADD or LD.

#### The bereaved child may:

- ◆ Become the class clown
- ◆ Become withdrawn and unsociable
- ◆ Bed-wet or have nightmares
- ◆ Become restless in staying seated
- ◆ Call out of turn
- ◆ Not complete schoolwork
- ◆ Have problems listening and staying on task
- ◆ Become overly talkative
- ◆ Become disorganized
- ◆ Show reckless physical action
- ◆ Show poor concentration around external stimuli
- ◆ Show difficulty in following directions
- ◆ Cry unexpectedly
- ◆ Get stomachaches and headaches

#### Creating grief awareness in the schools

So often adults tell children they "need to move on and get over their loss." We, in the educational system, need to recognize and build into our grief awareness the ongoing journey of processing grief. Each child's grief is unique, and the grief experience is different for each individual.

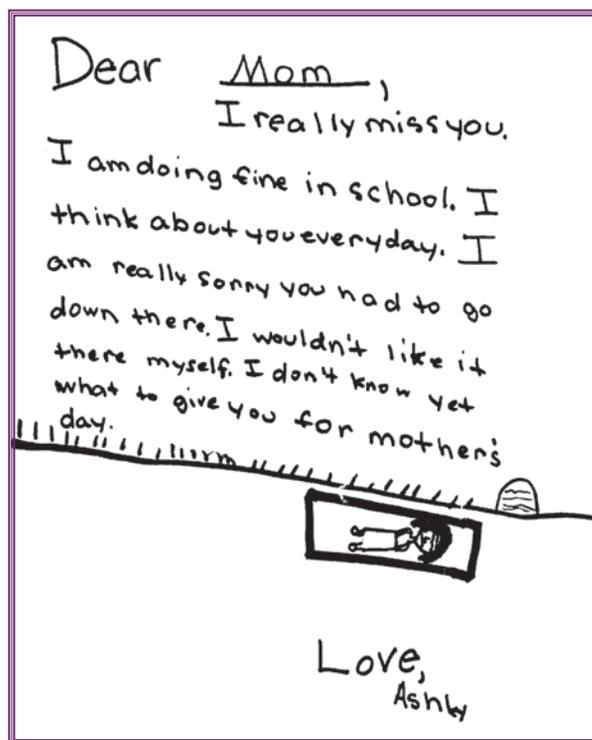
Katie was a third grader whose mom had died of a sudden heart attack when she was in first grade. Her art class was making Mother's Day gifts, and she was flooded with memories as class members began talking about their moms. Katie burst into tears and ran out of the room. Mr. Barry, her teacher, rushed after her. Katie explained that her mom had died two years ago, and it was still painful to remember her.

Mr. Barry admonished Katie. "It's been two years since your mom has died. You need to get over it and move on!"

Katie said she hated her teacher for saying that. The last thing she wanted to do was forget her mom. What she needed, instead, were concrete ways to remember her. During grief therapy session that day, Katie and I lit a candle to remember her mom.

Perhaps Mr. Barry could have responded to Katie in a more compassionate way that would have enabled her to safely express challenging feelings in school. One useful procedure is creating an agreement with Katie to choose a designated safe adult in school to speak with when she missed her mom. Another effective intervention could have been to invite Katie to make a symbolic Mother's Day card for her mom, write a poem about her mom or plant a flower in her memory.

Letter and poetry writing are grief therapy techniques that allow children to create concrete ways to commemorate the death of a loved one. The following is a letter Ashley wrote to her mom on Mother's Day.



#### Interventions for the grieving child

Children gain a greater understanding of themselves when they can express previously hidden emotions. The awareness of unrecognized feelings also allows educators, parents and other caring adults to be more in touch with what is going on in the grief process. Grief feelings and thoughts are continuous and ever-changing, inundating their lives like waves on the ocean. These thoughts and feelings may arrive without warning, and children feel unprepared for their enormity in a school setting.

Educators can use a grief and loss inventory (Life and Loss, 3rd edition, Goldman, in-press 2012) as a tool for creating and storing history on the grieving child throughout his or her academic life. This history includes all losses and important dates of birthdays and deaths of loved ones that may have a great impact on the child through the years.

Educators can also use the concept of "teachable moments" to create a spontaneous lesson calling upon a life experience that is happening in "The Now." The death of Mrs. Arnold's class's goldfish, Goldie, was a huge loss to the kindergartners. Goldie's death during school provided a "teachable moment" whereby the children could express their

feelings about death and commemorate their loss with a burial ritual and memorial service.

### Classroom teachers can provide a safe haven for the grieving child by:

- ◆ Allowing the child to leave the room if needed
- ◆ Allowing the child to call home if necessary
- ◆ Creating a visit to the school nurse and guidance counselor periodically
- ◆ Changing some work assignments
- ◆ Assigning a class helper
- ◆ Creating some private time in the day
- ◆ Giving more academic progress reports

### Schools can help children commemorate a death in the school by:

- ◆ Creating a ceremony, releasing a balloon with a special note or lighting a candle
- ◆ Creating a memorial wall with stories and pictures of shared events
- ◆ Having an assembly about the student
- ◆ Planting a memory garden
- ◆ Initiating a scholarship fund
- ◆ Establishing an ongoing fundraiser such as a car wash or bake sale, with proceeds going toward the family's designated charity
- ◆ Placing a memorial page and picture in the school yearbook or school newspaper
- ◆ Sending flowers to the grieving family

### Conclusion

What we can mention, we can manage. This idea is a useful paradigm for educators to understand when formulating a safe environment for the grieving child. If professionals in the school system can acknowledge and express thoughts and feelings involving grief and loss, they can serve as role models for the ever-increasing population of students experiencing traumatic loss.

Today's children face a kaleidoscope of grief and loss issues ranging from school shootings, terrorism and hurricanes to a parent's deportation or imprisonment. Girls and boys are bombarded daily with graphic images of violence and sexuality. They are threatened at school by bullying and on their computers through cyberbullying. We as educators must create guidelines to aid children through their grief journey, protect them in school during vulnerable times and make their classroom an oasis of protection to explore life issues with support and guidance.

Educators can provide grief vocabulary; resources; and crisis and educational interventions, preventions and "post-ventions." Administrators, teachers and parents can join in creating a safe haven for the grieving child within the school system. By opening communication about loss and grief issues, educators can create a bridge between the world of fear, isolation and loneli-

ness to the world of truth, compassion and dignity for the grieving child. ◀

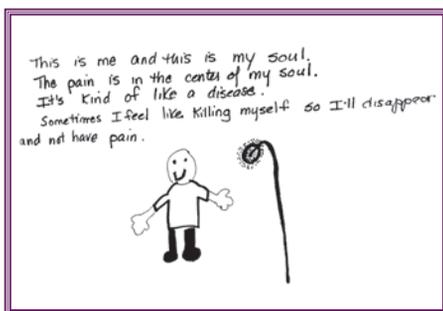


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Counselor (LCPC) and a National Certified Counselor (NBCC). She spent 18 years as a kindergarten and second-grade teacher, and elementary guidance counselor in the Baltimore County School system in Maryland. Goldman is a member of the continuing education faculty of the University of Maryland School of Social Work, Johns Hopkins University and a consultant to Head Start. She offers workshops to school systems and universities to educate caring adults to respond to children's loss issues. Goldman is the author of several books on helping children with grief issues: *Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children*, 3rd Ed. (In-press 2013, Taylor and Francis (1-800-821-8312), "Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children With Complicated Grief – Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence and Abuse, 2nd Ed." (2001), *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Help Children with Trauma in Today's World* (2005), *Children Also Grieve: Talking About Death and Healing* (2005) Jessica Kingsley Publishers (215 922 1161), *Great Answers to Difficult Questions About Death* (2009) and *Bart Speaks Out on Suicide* (1998) Western Psychological Services (1-800-648-8857).

All artwork and writing reprinted with permission from "Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children With Complicated Grief-Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence and Abuse" by Linda Goldman, 2002, New York: Taylor & Francis; "Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children," 3rd edition by Linda Goldman (In-press, 2013), New York: Taylor & Francis.

▶▶ See Books to Read to Grieving Kids on page 30



## What a bereaved child needs

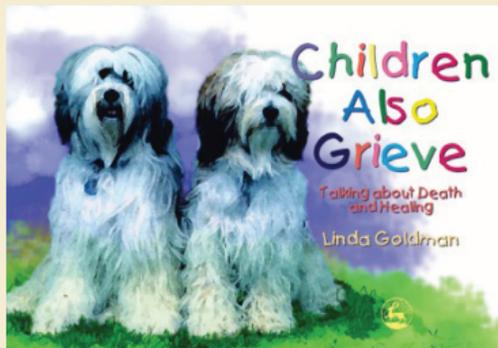
### Things to remember when your child is grieving

- ◆ The bereaved child needs to acknowledge a parent or sibling who died by using his or her name or sharing a memory.
- ◆ The bereaved child needs to tell his or her story over and over again.
- ◆ The bereaved child needs to use tools such as drawing, writing, role-playing, and reenactment to safely project feelings and thoughts about the loss and present life outside of themselves.
- ◆ The bereaved child needs to be allowed to go to a safe place outside the classroom when these unexpected, overwhelming feelings arise, without needing to explain why in front of fellow classmates.
- ◆ The bereaved child often is preoccupied with his or her own health and the health of loved ones. Providing a reality check, such as allowing the child to phone the surviving parent during the school day or to visit the school nurse can reassure boys and girls that they and their families are okay.
- ◆ The bereaved child needs to use memory work to create a physical way to remember their feelings and share them. Memory books are a collection of drawn or written feelings and thoughts that allow the child to re-experience memories in a safe way. The books serve as useful tools to enable children to tell about the person who died, and open discussion. Kids can share funny, happy or sad memories.

*Continued from page 29*

## BOOKS TO READ TO GRIEVING KIDS

▶ **Bart Speaks Out: An Interactive Storybook for Young Children About Suicide** by Linda Goldman (1998). This is a useful interactive storybook for young children that provides words to use for the young child to discuss the sensitive topic of suicide. Los Angeles, California: Western Psychological Services Publisher. Ages 5-10.



▶ **Children Also Grieve: Talking About Death and Healing** by Linda Goldman (2005). This is an interactive story book and memory book for young children. It can be divided into sections to use as ongoing discussions for children. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Ages 5-10.

▶ **Goodbye Mousie** by Robie Harris (2001). This is a beautiful book for a child that helps them to say goodbye to a pet and honor their life. Aladdin. Ages 4-10.

▶ **Brave Bart** by Caroline Sheppard (1998) is an excellent resource for children who have experienced trauma. The Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children. Ages 5-10.

▶ **And Still They Bloom** by Amy Rovere (2012). This is a family's journey of loss and healing. New York: American Cancer Society. Ages 8-12.

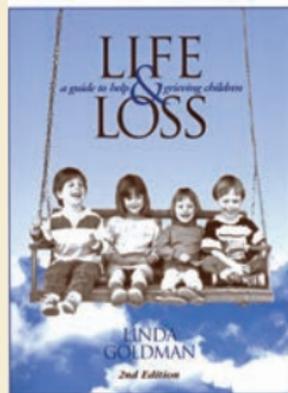
▶ **Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying** by Joyce Mills (2004). This is a story for children about dying. Washington, DC. Magination Press. Ages 5-10.

▶ **A Season for Mangoes** by Regina Hanson (2005). This is an excellent book that includes the rich culture of Jamaica in saying goodbye and memorializing. New York: Clarion. Ages 5-10.

▶ **The Juice Box Bully** by Bob Sornson and Maria Dismondy (2011). Mi: ferne press. This book empowers kids to stand up for others. Ages 5-10.

▶ **Fire in My Heart: Ice in My Veins** by Enid Traisman (1992). This is a wonderful workbook for teenagers to explore thoughts and feelings and record grief memories. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation. Teenagers.

### BOOKS TO READ FOR PARENTS OF GRIEVING KIDS

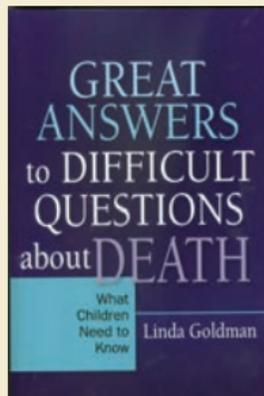


▶ **Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children**, 3rd edition by Linda Goldman (in press 2013) New York, New York: Taylor & Francis.

▶ **Teens Together Grief Support Group Curriculum: Adolescence Edition Grades 7-9.** (2000) By Linda Lehmann,

Shane R. Jimerson and Ann Gaasch. New York: : Routledge.

▶ **Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children with Complicated Grief Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence, and Abuse** by Linda Goldman (2002). New York: Taylor and Francis.



▶ **Great Answers to Difficult Questions About Death: What Children Need to Know** by Linda Goldman (2009). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

▶ **Bereavement Support Group Program for Children: Leader Manual 2nd Edition** by Beth Haasl and Hean Marnocha (1999). New York: Taylor and Francis.

▶ **Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World** by Linda Goldman (2005). New York: Taylor and Francis.