

Returning to School After a Death: How You Can Help

Going back to school can be an exciting yet anxious time for all students. If a child/youth has experienced the death of someone close to them, they may feel extremely nervous and reluctant about returning to class. Everyone is different and grieves in their own way but here are a few suggestions to help make the return to school feel a bit easier.

Sharing With Classmates

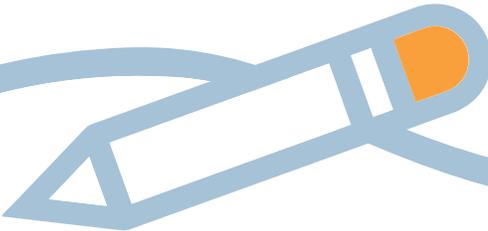
Many Lighthouse participants have told us that they wish they had more influence in the way their teachers, principals and classmates were told about the death and in how the death was communicated within the school. Ask the child/youth for their input about who is told and when, and if they want the death announced to the whole school or only to their class. Lighthouse participants who revealed the news to their classmates themselves, reported feeling “some control over an uncontrollable situation”. Some children may say they don’t want anyone to know but gently remind them that it may be easier for them if others are told because then they won’t have to say anything, and their classmates may be more understanding of their feelings. Ask if they want to be in attendance when the announcement is made or come in to school/class afterwards.

Practicing What To Say

Classmates might be curious and may seem awkward and insensitive with their comments and questions. Have your child decide ahead of time who they want to talk to about the death and then practice what they are going to say; for instance, “you know my dad was really sick, he died in August”. Talk to your child about situations they are worried about and brainstorm what to say, how to walk away, or to simply say, “I don’t want to talk about it”.

Develop A Plan With The Teacher

Along with your child, talk to their classroom teacher to develop a plan for times when your child is feeling sad, overwhelmed, or unfocused. These emotions are very normal for grieving children. They may be triggered by words, memories, sounds, smells, etc. that the teacher may not be aware of.



Some children place something at a corner of their desk, like a water bottle, to signal to their teacher that they need a break. The break could be putting their head down on the desk, going to the washroom, drawing or writing in a journal, or taking time to talk with the principal, social worker, or some other adult who can support them. After a death, youth may worry for the safety of others in their family; this is a normal grief reaction and one that should be addressed with teachers and administrators. Have a plan in place for those days/times when your child needs to know that you are safe, such as a quick phone call or text message. Talk with your child about drop off/pick-up from school and plans for after school care.

Coping Skills

Practice coping skills with your child to help them manage their feelings; deep belly breathing, tensing then relaxing different parts of their body, or manipulating worry beads or playdough. Lighthouse children have shared that they try to think of something funny or look around the classroom and count all the purple objects. Wearing or carrying something that reminds them of you, or of the person who died, can be of great comfort too.

You can help by being open and available to listen to children/youth talk about their concerns and worries, as this will provide them with relief and support. Take care of yourself too. This will help to reduce some of the anxiety of a new and different school year for both you and your child.