

When Grief Comes to School: Back to School Following Loss

Dr. Malina Spirito, Clinical Director

As the summer quickly speeds by and the familiar “Back to School” jingles appear on the television, grieving families are faced with yet another hurdle to clear in their journey through loss. Going back to school after experiencing a major loss or death can feel daunting, even for the most diligent and eager student. As the Clinical Director of *Supporting Kidds, The Center for Grieving Children and Their Families*, I regularly encounter children and families grappling with the challenges of managing school demands in the face of grief.

Consider these thoughts as you prepare for the back to school season:

1. Kids do best when they know what to expect.

Returning to school represents, for many children, a change in routine. This transition can be a challenge for anyone, but especially for the grieving child who is grappling with relocating a sense of safety and predictability in a world that has been, in many ways, turned upside down. Caregivers can best support grieving children by aiming to bring back a sense of routine and predictability to the child’s world. Begin preparing your child several weeks in advance for the upcoming change in schedule. Be sure to remind your child of the plans regarding day-to-day needs and tasks, such as:

- Set the routine for bed time, wake time, showers, baths, and preparing school clothes.
- Establish who will be responsible for waking the child and preparing him/her for the school day.
- Determine who will pick the child up from school each day.
- Create a calendar to manage sports, activities, and due dates for projects and tests.

2. Recognize the challenges.

Bereavement can have profound impact on physical and cognitive functioning, making it difficult for a person to focus, concentrate, and follow-through on tasks. For school-aged children, grief can certainly impact academic performance. Be mindful of the wear-and-tear that grief has on the body and support your child in breaking tasks down into smaller components, taking regular breaks, and asking for help when needed. Remind your child that challenges related to decreased concentration and energy are temporary and guide your child in establishing healthy coping tools to help manage these stressors.

3. Practice open, healthy communications.

While most caregivers and children would agree on the desire to succeed academically, they often have vastly different ideas about what this success should look like in terms of when/how tasks are completed. Practice using “I-statements” and empathic responses to engage your child in healthy dialogue while establishing expectations for school performance. Be clear about your expectations, while remaining open to engaging your child’s thoughts and ideas about how to meet those expectations.

For added pointers on healthy communication, come to Supporting Kidds to peruse our newly updated Lending Library. We have great parenting resources and our clinical staff is always happy to make recommendations!

4. Engage a wide system of support.

Because grief is not a linear and finite process, it is not easy to predict when, if, and for how long grief-related challenges will occur. Because of this level of uncertainty, I advise grieving families, and the professionals who work with them, to be mindful of the potential for academic challenges and to make appropriate plans in anticipation of potential challenges down the line.

Be sure to contact your child’s teachers and counselors *before* the start of school to notify them of the loss and how your child is adjusting. Encourage school personnel to be in touch with you, as well as any therapists or counselors your child may be working with, to ensure everyone is providing the child with the same information. Supporting Kidds is happy to meet with school teachers and staff to help establish a system of support for grieving children as they return to school.

Caregivers and teachers can work together to establish an academic support system for the grieving student to counterbalance any declines in academic performance. Teachers and school counselors can work with a family to develop plans for tutoring and homework help to aid the grieving child.

5. Model patience and flexibility, for your child and yourself.

Remember that you are also grieving. Research and experience informs us that one of the greatest predictors of a child’s adjustment following a loss is based on having a high-functioning caregiver. So model healthy self-care and patience with yourself! It is important for your child to know that you are doing all you can to ensure your ability to stay safe, healthy, and available for your child.

Please call us for information about our bereavement support groups for children and their caregivers, or to discuss individual/family therapy.

We want to make sure that no child grieves alone.