

Guidelines for helping people with Developmental Disabilities Mourn

Do's and Don'ts for School Staff:

Do:

- Offer time (brief but regular meetings can mean a lot)
- Be available to listen
- Talk about the good and bad memories
- Accept a student's feelings
- Say "I don't know" in relation to questions you really don't have the answer for.
- Allow students to cry
- Watch for behavior changes
- Be aware of previous bereavement and/or depression
- Be sensitive to beliefs and cultural backgrounds
- Use rituals

Don't:

- · Assume that the person with autism can cope without support
- · Thing they do not 'feel' the loss
- · Deny their thoughts or views on the death
- · Use cliché's such as 'You need to be strong' or 'You are coping well'
- · Make new or sudden changes to the routine
- · Think that you cannot support them

Helpful Rituals for Developmentally Disabled Grievors

The use of photographs in ritual

- Have students sit in a circle and pass around a photo of the person who died and share memories. If the child is non verbal the facilitator can share the memories "for the child" about the loss.

Using storytelling in ritual

- Write a story about the person who has died in collaboration with the individual with the disability.

Use of memory objects in ritual

- Put a group of objects together that remind them of the person who died, such as photos, books, clothing articles, papers etc. For someone less verbal, let child choose what goes in pile. Leave the objects for several days. Limited time for those easily distracted.

Use of Drawing in Ritual

- Have the child draw a picture of the person who died or memories of the person and share it with others. Even if the child has limited fine motor skills, encourage the child to draw what he/she remembers.

Use of Music in Ritual

- Listen to music that the person who died liked or that reminds her of the person who died. The song may relate to the person's job or personality trait. Can listen, or move to music or draw.

Use of Writing in Ritual

- The child can write or dictate a letter to or about the person.
- Perhaps provide child with a letter with sentence starters.

Use of Stones in Ritual

- Share a memory of the person and then place a small stone in a decorative fountain or paint the rock or write a word on it. Take time daily to remember the person.

Use of Daily Memory in Ritual

- Choose an activity that the person used to do with or to the child. This may be self-care or taking a walk, cooking or playing a game together. As the teacher does this activity intentionally talk about the person who has died. This can occur immediately after the death or delayed for weeks. Pay attention to student's cues in order to help the child in the healing process.

(Adapted from : *Helping People with Developmental Disabilities Mourn: Practical Rituals for Caregivers* by Marc A. Markell, PhD, 2005)

"We should never underestimate, and we cannot overestimate, the simple power of acceptance, affirmation and validation. It is the key to supporting grief." *Guidebook on Helping Persons with Mental Retardation Mourn* by Jeffrey Kauffman (2005)