

Grief and Children with Special Needs:

Children with special needs may express their grief and feelings differently, but their grief is still just as powerful. Keep these strategies in mind when working with these students:

- Be open and honest. Use appropriate words such as “dead” and “death” and avoid euphemisms. Don’t lie to the child or tell half truths.
- Beware of telling a child that the person is “just sleeping”.
- Be available to listen, to talk or simply spend time with the child.
- Be patient as the same questions may be asked over and over again.
- Allow the child to show their grief in whatever way they want, as long as it is safe. Some want to just ignore it and have fun. That is okay too.
- Enable the child to say goodbye and see the body of the person who died if at all possible, and encourage parents to allow that. Research shows that when children see the body, they show less behavioral acting out in the future.
- Don’t exclude the child from helpful rituals of death, which will help them understand someone important in their life has died. Children with developmental disabilities need more concrete rituals and explicit directions, and simplified activities.
- Rituals that are abstract may be confusing, frustrating and of little value.
- Please don’t try to protect the children from grief, but rather try to support and reassure them, acknowledge their losses and help them to find healthy ways to express their feelings.
- Often those who lack the grief vocabulary to talk about feelings, tend to express their feelings through their behavior.
- Avoid too much change at this confusing and distressing time, if possible.
- Always give LD children space and time to express feelings.

Some helpful ways to help bereaved children with learning disabilities:

1. Look together at photographs of the person who has died and share memories.
2. Sending greeting cards to the family, sibling, child
3. Encourage the grieving child to wear an article of clothing that may be a linking or comfort object to the person who died or is gone.
4. Having a pillow or blanket made from person’s clothes helps too.
5. Listen to the person’s favorite music
6. Make a book about the person who died
7. Light a candle on special days and share memories
8. Make a memory box. Child chooses what memories go inside.
9. Read books, Badgers Parting Gifts: sadness and joy in memories
10. Prepare them for the funeral, how to behave, what they will experience.

Grief issues specific to people with autism:

- Each person with autism will react individually to bereavement and the approach to support needs to be a unique as the individual.
- People with autism may share the common responses to death and bereavement such as denial, anger and despair.
- The grieving process of people with autism may be profoundly affected by their disabilities.
- Skilled support is an important factor in helping individuals move through their grief.
- It is difficult to generalize how each child will experience loss through death, but such a loss can give rise to phobias, fears, obsession, lack of understanding, and resistance to change, which can be considered by others to be inappropriate reactions or even callous indifference. Children on the Spectrum depend on the security of familiarity. Often these children may have difficulty to find words to express their feelings, which is why goodbye rituals are so important.
- It is important to balance how much information is given. Too much or too little information may make it difficult to voice concerns or ask the right questions. There is the chance that the person will develop clinical anxiety and/or depression.

When to refer to a professional:

- They deny that anyone has died, or act as if nothing happened
- They threaten or talk of suicide (particularly difficult as many with autism also suffer with depression and may generally have thoughts to suicide)
- They become unusually and persistently aggressive or engage in anti-social behavior.
- They become withdrawn and socially isolated.

Things to remember:

- Remember that those with a very limited number of close relationships experience the death of a friend or family member sometimes as a catastrophic loss and the idea of re-investing in other people is very difficult. Many of these children become highly attached and dependent to their teachers or school staff so when a staff member leaves the job or has died, it may be very difficult for the child.
- Staff needs to empathize and not try to make the person “get over it”. Encourage the students’ family to allow them to ‘see the dead body’ to help them understand that the death is irreversible and that he/she is not coming back. Staff can anticipate reactions, listen and read cues, intervene, ask how the person feels, talk about the deceased and explain the normal grieving process. Encourage the child to keep a feelings diary to help deal with all of the

- feelings. Commemorating anniversary days by developing ritual can help provide the children a time to remember and help cut down on obsessive behaviors.
- Continue routines, keep decision making to a minimum and encourage connections. Returning to school or work after a loss can be very stressful. Some worry about their surviving parent at home alone.
 - Sometimes anger is directed at the person who shared the news of the death or it may be generalized. Anger may also be apparent when activities provided by the deceased are no longer available. Enable students to express this anger without hurting themselves, others or property, for example using exercise or a punching bag.
 - Remember that some won't react at first or reacts in a way that is different that you would expect.
 - Discuss with children that it is common to feel it was "their fault" someone died, get headaches, feel numb, ask many questions, worry etc. Remind them that they need social support and help, someone to talk to and a place to remember.

Resources found on website: Grief Speaks <http://www.griefspeaks.com/id96.html>