

## Supporting Grieving Students: What NOT to Say

By The Coalition to Support Grieving Students | March, 2015

*When one of my students returned to class after a week away, I said, “Good to see you! Where have you been?”*

*He said, “Oh, we had a family thing.” He was vague. Then he sat at his desk, and I could see he was distracted. I was totally shocked to hear later that day that his father had died.*

*I told one of my colleagues, “Well, with a boy like this—private, kind of withdrawn—I think I just need to wait for some sort of signal that he wants to talk. I honestly don’t know what I could say that would make him feel any better.”*

*And this other teacher said, “Oh, no. We need to speak directly to students who are grieving and let them know we’re thinking of them. Then they can decide if they want to talk more. I already talked to him, and I think he found it helpful.”*

*So at my next class, I asked this student to stay after for a moment. I told him I was sorry to hear his father had died and asked how he was doing. He said he was fine. But a week later, he asked to speak with me again. He said he was having a hard time concentrating, and our coursework was the most difficult for him right now.*

*I told him I expected he’d find it easier to concentrate over time, and that we could make some adjustments for now. We changed some of his assignments for the coming weeks, and he just started checking in regularly after that.\**

What should you say to a grieving child? A third grader whose mother just died of cancer? A 16-year-old whose brother was shot and killed in a drive-by? An eighth grader whose beloved uncle, serving in the military, has been killed in action?

Many of us—perhaps most—aren’t at all sure how to approach that kind of conversation. We might hesitate or hold back. We might wonder whether anything we say can possibly alleviate the child’s suffering. We might worry that we’ll say the wrong thing.

This is when adults are likely to make the most harmful choice of all—to say nothing. This actually communicates to children that you don’t care, or aren’t available, or aren’t confident that the child can cope.

Do people say clumsy things in response to a death? All the time. But understanding what *not* to say can help school professionals be more confident and effective when they do reach out to grieving students.

Consider these common remarks. They are well-intentioned, but not helpful:

- *I know just how you feel.* You cannot. Each child's experience is unique. Until children tell us what they are feeling, we can't really know.
- *You must be incredibly angry/sad/frightened/confused.* It is more useful to *ask* children how they are feeling than to tell them.
- *At least you had the holidays together before she died.* Statements such as this are likely to quiet down true expressions of grief.

So what *should* adults say to children? Open-ended questions are usually most helpful.

- How are you doing? How is your family doing?
- What are some memories you have about your father?
- Tell me more about what this past week has been like for you, after you learned your sister died.

### **Find Out More**

The website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](http://grievingstudents.scholastic.com/) [http://grievingstudents.scholastic.com/] provides a module specifically addressing "What Not to Say." Geared towards school professionals, it includes a video and a downloadable module summary with more examples, along with concrete suggestions that can help caring adults speak up and support grieving children effectively.

*\*This is a composite case example.*

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create [grievingstudents.org](http://grievingstudents.org), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.