

Mini-Articles: Cultural Sensitivity

Grief Across Cultures: Teacher Worries About “Doing Something Wrong”

“The grandmother of one of my students died. The two had been very close. I was invited to the family’s home for the visitation and wanted to be there to support my student. But then I found myself feeling hesitant. The family’s culture and religious practices were quite different from my own, and different from those of my other students. It would be unfamiliar. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Suddenly I was thinking, ‘What if I do or say something wrong?’”

--Fourth grade teacher

School personnel may not be familiar with the rituals and expectations of every culture represented among their students. Rather than reaching out to a family after the death of a loved one, some hold back, concerned they might do something inappropriate or offend the family.

Although there are real differences between cultures, the fundamental experience of grief is universal. Chances are quite good that a school professional who is thoughtful, sensitive and respectful will be able to help grieving students and provide meaningful support to their families.

For guidance on addressing grief with families from different cultures, check the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). The website’s materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

3 Tips: Supporting Grieving Students from Different Cultures

Different cultures respond to death in different ways. Some may be expressive and celebrate a life well-lived. Others may be quiet and reflective. While most school professionals are familiar with traditions of some students, they are unlikely to know all of the practices of each culture represented in their classroom or school.

For grieving students and their families, the support of school personnel is valuable and unique. When reaching across cultures in these situations, the following three tips can be helpful.

1. *Ask questions.* Ask openly when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual. For example:

“Can you help me understand how I can best be of help to you and your family?”
2. *Watch out for assumptions.* Many families blend traditions of several cultures. Assumptions about how a grieving family is expected to act because they come from a certain culture can cloud our perceptions. We might miss opportunities to be helpful.
3. *Be present and authentic.* Approach a grieving family with an open mind and heart. Be guided by their responses.

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Supporting Grieving Families: Q&A About Cultural Competence

Students in our school come from a lot of different cultures. What’s a good way for me to learn about how their families deal with grief?

We are all enriched when we learn about different cultural beliefs, expectations and traditions. Novels, movies, blogs and even textbooks about cultural differences can all be sources of helpful information.

One of the best ways to learn about a family’s beliefs and practices in bereavement is to ask openly. You might ask how you could best be of help to a grieving family, or ask a family member to tell you more about how they will approach the grief and remembrance of their loved one.

If a student’s culture is not familiar to me, how can I be sure I won’t do something inappropriate if I reach out to the family at a time of grief?

We’ve all had the experience of being clumsy at a delicate moment with a friend or family member, or with a student or student’s family. This is a natural and unavoidable part of human interactions.

When a family is grieving, we feel a greater obligation to be sensitive and supportive. This sincere desire to be helpful and genuine concern is actually our greatest asset. Even if we are not familiar with the specific customs of a family or its culture, we can be thoughtful and respectful. We can be observant. We can ask questions openly, and listen to responses carefully. These practices are experienced as helpful by almost all families, whatever their culture.

What's the best way for me to become more skillful in supporting grieving students and families whose culture is different from my own?

Although there are real differences in traditions between cultures, the fundamental experience of grief is universal. Rather than trying to gain knowledge about every culture, it's best to first aim to become competent in supporting a grieving individual in at least one culture. Probably your own would be a good start.

If someone is able to be thoughtful, empathic, sensitive and supportive to a grieving child of one culture, chances are quite good that this person will be able to help a child of another culture.

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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](#), 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.