

For Mother’s Day, Being Thoughtful in a Different Way Can Help Support Students

Mother’s Day offers a rich array of choices for classroom educators. Run an internet search on “Mother’s Day classroom activities” and literally hundreds of ideas appear—quizzes, art projects, research, math and that longtime standby, making cards for Mom.

These can be fun endeavors for students and teachers alike. But a classroom activity focusing on mothers can be challenging for a student whose mother has died. It can also be difficult for students who don’t live with their mothers. Lesson plans posted on the internet rarely take note of this.

Amber Serfling, a special education teacher at King Learning Center in Deer River, MN, is an educator who *has* taken note. “I work with seven students, and three of them currently live with their mothers,” she explains. Her other students live with family members or in kinship care.

Ms. Serfling has learned to make small extra efforts in lesson planning that have had generous positive returns. “Teachers don’t want to introduce lessons that trouble or traumatize our students. I’ve found that if I just bring some mindfulness as I plan, it’s easy enough to accommodate the different experiences in my students’ lives.”

For example, last year she found a Mother’s Day activity she liked on a Pinterest board. The activity suggested teachers create a colorful backdrop that said, “Mom, I love you because...” Students could write out a message completing the statement, the teacher could take a photo of the student with the message, and students could make cards with their photos.

According to Ms. Serfling, “My students loved this activity. And the only accommodation I made was not including the word ‘Mom’ on the backdrop. We talked about Mother’s Day as a day of appreciation for those who help us most—someone who is always there for us. I told students that didn’t need to be a mom.”

Her students wrote messages to a range of people who have supported them. The class framed their photos and then gave them to the person they’d chosen.

In any class, there is a reasonable chance that one or more students will have lost a parent. In fact, 1 in 20 students will experience the death of a parent by the time they complete their schooling. Parents may be absent for other reasons as well—military service, incarceration, abandonment, long-distance work situations.

The [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) encourages educators to consider adapting not only Mother’s Day projects, but activities at other holidays that focus on family connections—Father’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Thanksgiving and more. Offer students options suitable to their range of life experiences.

Instead of making a card for their dads on Father’s Day, for example, students can make a card for an adult who has supported them in an important way.

Instead of drawing a picture of what their family did for Thanksgiving last year (some families might not have celebrated the holiday), students can draw a picture of a family celebration they’ve enjoyed, or one they would like to attend.

When teachers know a student has lost a parent, they might want to speak privately before activities that focus on parents or families. Together, they can work out an option that is comfortable for the student—perhaps shifting the focus of the activity, as Ms. Serfling did, or offering another activity for that student.

The [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) hosts a website with videos and downloadable modules providing more information about students and grief. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

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.