



## How do I re-integrate a student who has been absent after a death?

Just asking this question reflects sensitivity to the importance of recognizing both the short and long term challenges of helping bereaved students return to school. It's important to balance the uniqueness of each child and the individuality of grief reactions with the basic premise of respecting the privacy of the bereaved. Most children do not want their classmates to have much information about their loss.

Bereaved students of all ages are often embarrassed by expressions of sympathy, whether from peers or faculty members. They often construe these expressions as *'people feeling sorry for me'*. Especially as they approach middle school and high school, students often feel that they have the right to share as much (or as little) as they want with both peers and teachers. Many students report that experiencing a death makes them feel *'different'* from their classmates at a time when fitting into their peer group is extremely important.

## So how can I both acknowledge the death and respect the privacy of the student?

When the school first learns of about the death, many teachers invite their students to write individual sympathy notes, especially if the bereaved student will be absent for an extended period of time. Having the entire class sign a sympathy card that is mailed to the home of the bereaved is a simple way to express the condolences of the class. Communicating personal expressions of grief in writing is often easier than verbalizing them and can reduce the anxiety that surrounds *'not knowing the right thing to say'*. Asking how students would like to be treated in similar situations can sometimes facilitate sensitive and empathic responses to the bereaved.

In some cases, the bereaved returns to school the day after the death or before the funeral has taken place. When this happens, you might assume that this student feels more comfortable with the routine, predictability and support available in the school than the situation at home. And you can certainly ask the student *"Is there any way I can help you over the next few days?"*

In general, however, most bereaved students are absent for several days and do require re-integration into the classroom setting. What's essential in the short term is to:

- Treat the student's return to the classroom like absences related to illnesses. Your consistency in response will not single out the bereaved for unwanted special attention.
- Privately and simply acknowledge the death if you have not done so already. A simple *"I'm very sorry about your mom's death"* is sufficient.
- Validate the student's return to school by saying something like *"I'm glad to see you back in school. We've missed you."* You can also suggest this same response to students who are unsure about what to say.
- Discuss missed class work and assignments and make arrangements for completion. If necessary, adjust immediate expectations. *"I know this has been extremely difficult and you may be*

*having trouble concentrating on school work so let's talk about a short-term strategy to take off some of the academic pressure. What do you think about take home assignments instead of having to turn in all your missed work?"*

- Monitor the student's academic performance and social interactions from a discrete distance. If you observe behavior that concerns you, check it out.
- Encourage the student to use appropriate school resources for additional support. *"If you need to talk to someone during the school day you can always go to \_\_\_\_\_."*

The long term issues in re-integration require gentle and persistent attention to the academic performance and social behavior of the bereaved child. Some decline in performance might certainly be expected in the aftermath of the death and it is important to make realistic accommodations to compensate for the difficulty the bereaved student may have in concentrating, studying or completing assignments. These accommodations should only be used on a short-term basis. Students who have had their academic standards excused for long periods of time report they think that their teachers *'feel sorry'* for them by not requiring them to work competitively with the rest of their class.

Students who continue to have difficulty after four to six weeks might be experiencing emotional effects from the death like death depression and should be referred to the appropriate resources for assessment. In situations like this, your classroom can be guided by the professional who makes the assessment. **What's critical is that you become part of the team that is working to meet the needs of the grieving student with discretion and appropriate support.**

#### RE-INTEGRATION SUMMARY

- Welcome returning students privately
- Coach other classmates if necessary
- Treat the return to school like other excused absences
- Discuss missed assignments and make appropriate accommodations
- Observe and monitor academic and social behavior
- Encourage the use of additional school resources