



Sometimes I See Students Who Have No Reaction At All to Death

Or they have what I consider to be inappropriate reactions, like making jokes. Doesn't this indicate a big problem? Not necessarily. We have to be careful in applying our adult understanding of appropriate grief reactions to children. Because the way children react to most things in life is based on their maturity and developmental abilities, what we observe about grief in children looks different from what we observe in adults.

1. Children generally approach death with emotional caution, which is similar to how they approach all life events they find emotionally challenging. Because their immature ego structures do not have the capacity to tolerate intense emotions for extended periods of time, they experience feelings briefly, and then back away from them. When viewed from an adult perspective, children may appear to be in denial about what has happened. In all likelihood, they are simply trying to deal with the reality of the loss in small, manageable doses.
2. Children work through painful feelings differently than adults do. The play of children, for example, can serve many functions. One of these functions is to help children deal with and resolve painful feelings and memories. Physical play or creative projects like arts and crafts provide children with the outlets they need for emotional expression while keeping them connected to their peers, from whom they receive support and validation.
3. Frequent illness and somatic complaints are common reactions of grieving children and visits to the school nurse may become regular occurrences. It can be helpful to point out to children how we sometimes use our bodies to express feelings that are different to put into words.
4. There really aren't any initial reactions to learning about a death that are inappropriate. All reactions are emotionally functional. For example, silliness and joking are well known cover-ups for anxiety and worry. Anger can often reflect our disappointment that the deceased didn't take better care of him/herself or the fact that this valued person is no longer an active part of our life. A simple question like "I want to understand a little more about why you feel this way" can sometimes cut through the cover-up feeling and get to what's really going on with the student at that deeper level.
5. Another important difference about grief in children is that the meaning of a loss, especially the death of a parent or caregiver, will change as they grow and mature. At each developmental stage the reality of how that loss affects their lives will need to be re-evaluated and re-grieved.