

BEREAVEMENT INTERVENTIONS FOR STUDENTS

November 2006

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Background...

- A large number of young children and adolescents are widely affected by the loss of a close relative or friend. The loss of a parent or grandparent is listed as the most common form of bereavement. Consequently, students often experience grief, withdrawal, sadness and despair following a loss. Students also experience distraction from schoolwork and they are hostile or act out against teachers or other staff. As a result, research has been dedicated towards helping students deal with loss through methods in the classroom as well as outside of school.
- A number of theories about the bereavement process exist including: The stage or Phase model of bereavement; Death as a severe stress or trauma necessitating professional intervention; Task Theory; Family Systems Theory and Narratives Theory. Studies have been conducted to examine the workable interventions that coincide with these theories.
- Intervention strategies include individual counseling, play therapy, bibliotherapy, family therapy and group therapy.

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What works...

- Interventions can help to prevent adjustment problems, depression and other mental health problems. Intervention can also alleviate immediate distress in students experiencing loss. Interventions that serve to enhance attachment and security also lead to a decrease in future or prolonged disturbances in children.
- Early intervention helps to assist with mourning and therefore the student experiences better adjustment to social and environmental changes.
- The most common and important forms of intervention and/or coping with bereavement include help from: family, friends, time and an official social support system. Also, self-help or reflectance by the bereaved child him/herself, ongoing communication as well as help by the school are all helpful.
- In a review of the literature of strategies employed by teachers on coping with loss, a number of helpful methods were established. In situations where teachers did not feel adequately prepared to assist a child with bereavement, the child was referred to outside support or external agencies offering child bereavement services. In addition, support and advice about the child's progress from external agencies was helpful to teachers. Counseling availability is also important. It is helpful for students even when counselors assume simple roles, such as listeners and whether they are familiar to the student or not. Even providing information about the grieving process and possibly involving students in support groups are also helpful.
- Students themselves may aid in the grieving process by providing their own forms of intervention through remembrance and reflectance through the usage of various media including essays and artwork (Bibliotherapy). Supportive parents seem to be necessary. Ongoing communication including encouragement to discuss feelings surrounding a loss is essential and may aid in adjustment. Parents and peers are also important influences and help with coping but in different situations. For example, parental support is most helpful when coping with the loss of a close family member or parent and peer support is most helpful when coping with peer loss.

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BOTTOM LINE ACTIONABLE MESSAGE

Things to consider...

- The limited help on a teacher's part may be due to the fact that he/she may not be aware that the child has undergone a recent loss. Also, teachers are sometimes not informed of the resulting family structures surrounding the child experiencing a loss which further adds to the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding any potential counseling of the child. Additionally, concerns have been noted in bereavement literature that any negative familial situations may reduce any progress made during bereavement counseling. All of these, along with a lack of staff comfort with the issue of bereavement may be extremely unhelpful in the intervention process for bereaved students.

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