

GIVING CHILDREN THE TOOLS TO TAME THE MONSTER:

TALKING TO STUDENTS ABOUT THE TRAUMA ASSOCIATED WITH
LOSS EVENTS IN SCHOOLS

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Presented by

Dr. Mark Lepore, EdD, LPC, LCSW

Consultantships

Allegheny Family Network
PA Women Work
American Red Cross
Pittsburgh Public Schools

Jewish Family & Community Services
UPMC Health Network
Department of Defense
Employee Assistance Programs Crisis Intervention

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Children Grieve Too Normal Signs of Grief

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- ▶ Adults and children need to be aware of the normal signs of grief.
- ▶ When educators and parents see signs of grief, they can ensure that children get the help and support they need.
- ▶ And when children learn normal signs of grief, they can share similar ways of expressing thoughts and feelings with other grieving children.
- ▶ The following are common responses to grief.

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Children May:

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- Tell and recall their stories
- Become preoccupied with death or their own health and that of a surviving parent or guardian.
- Speak of dead loved one in the present.
- Feel the presence of a loved one.
- Imitate and idolize a loved one who died.
- Become the class clown or the class bully.
- Withdraw from other children
- Show an inability to concentrate and have a tendency to daydream
- Experience nightmares, manifest bedwetting, or regress and become clingy.
- Complain of stomachaches and headaches.

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Clichés That Inhibit the Grief Process In Children

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- Children need direct and simple language explaining death
- When defining death we could say:
- “Death is when the body stops working. Usually people die when they’re very, very old, or very, very, very, very sick or their bodies are so injured that the doctors and nurses can’t make their bodies work again.”

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The following examples show how children misunderstand clichés:

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- “Mom said they put our dog to sleep. Will I die when I go to sleep too?”
- “Grandpa went to heaven”, Alice thought, “Why can’t I go to?”
- “Do you think Dad is watching over me?” Kevin asked. “I hope not. That’s too embarrassing.”
- Five-year-old Mary wondered, “Grandma said God loved Grandpa so much he took him to heaven. Doesn’t God love me that much?”

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Ways to Help the Grieving Child Grieving children must feel heard and understood

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- Many sensitive issues arise, and feelings of worry, sadness, rage, terror, shame, abandonment, and self-hatred will emerge.
- Children must feel secure and free to express their thoughts and feelings, and feel listened to in the process.
- It is usually a good idea to encourage children to share pictures of deceased loved ones in order to open a dialogue and allow the expression of memories.
- When children express previously hidden emotions, they gain a greater understanding of themselves and allow adults to be more in touch with what is going on in their grieving process
- Grief feeling and thoughts are continual and ever-changing

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Ways to Help the Grieving Child

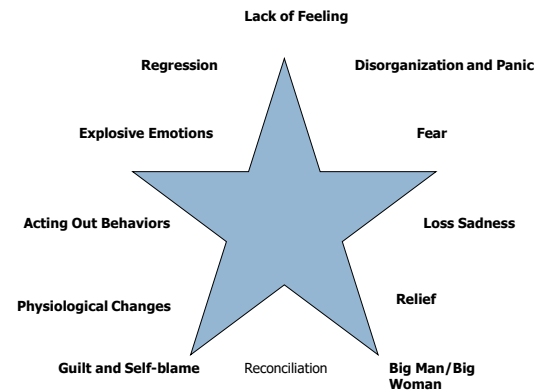
Grieving children must feel heard and understood

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- Memory work is used in grief therapy to enable children to tell about a person who died and open discussion
- Memory Books are a collection of drawings and writings that allow a child to re-experience memories and share thoughts and feelings in a safe way.
- Letter writing is another tool that allows children to express unrecognized feelings.
- Remember, it is healthy for a grieving child to cry.

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Dimensions of Childhood Grief



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Ten Common Myths About Childhood Bereavement

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- **MYTH 1:**
 - Grief and mourning are the same experience
 - **MYTH 2:**
 - A child's grief and mourning is short in duration
 - **MYTH 3:**
 - There is a predictable and orderly stage-like progression to the
 - Experience of grief and mourning
 - **MYTH 4:**
 - Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve and mourn
 - **MYTH 5:**
 - Children are not affected by the grief and mourning of the adults who are around them.

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Ten Common Myths About Childhood Bereavement

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- **MYTH 6:**
 - The trauma of childhood bereavement always leads to a maladjusted adult life.
 - **MYTH 7:**
 - Children are better off if they don't attend funerals.
 - **MYTH 8:**
 - Children who express tears are being "weak" and harming themselves in the long run.
 - **MYTH 9:**
 - Adults should be able to instantly teach children about religion and death.
 - **MYTH 10:**
 - The goal in helping bereaved children is to "get them over" the grief and mourning.

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Create a Safe Haven

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Accepting children's reactions.

- They may vary widely from listening and going out to play to withdrawal or anger.
- Reassure children that their reactions are common and OK
- Some need to tell their story over and over and others may choose writing, drawing, or puppetry to express emotions.

Encourage the child to express their feelings and listen without passing judgment.

- Help younger children learn to use words that express feelings

If behavior at bedtime is a problem, give the child extra time and reassurance.

- Let him or her sleep with a light on or in your room for a limited time if necessary.

Reassure children and adolescents that the traumatic event was not their fault.

Allow children to cry or be sad

- Don't expect them to be brave or tough

Encourage children and adolescents to feel in control

- Let them make some decisions about meals, what to wear, etc.

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Remember Adults are Role Models

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- Model responsible ways to react to this disaster
- Whenever possible, give yourself a bit of time to come to terms with the event before you attempt to reassure children. This may not always be possible.
- Children are in touch with the affect more than the stated words.
- Guide children to create ways to help. Help empower children
- Explain how adults help
- Include kids in planning and participating in volunteer activities

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Remember Adults are Role Models

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- Families may want to say a prayer for families and victims
- Watch for and correct self-blame by your child. Children tend to blame themselves for all that happens around them.
- Model honesty about feelings by describing your own, at a comfortable level.
- Respect their need for privacy and time alone
- Monitor media coverage for children.

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Remember Adults are Role Models

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- Consider whether news coverage with visual imagery that may be graphical and frightening
- Restrict time for disaster related family viewing, allowing adults to be present to help process children's thoughts and feelings.
- Find ways to protect children from further harm and from further exposure
- to traumatic stimuli

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Feelings	
Fear, terrified	Rage, anger, irritability, helpless
Anxious	Loss of interest
Sad	Changing mood
Guilty	
Thinking	
Difficulty concentrating and thinking	Intrusive thoughts, memories and flashbacks
Difficulty learning new information	Worry about safety of themselves and others
Difficulty making decisions	Preoccupation with death, suicidal ideation (adolescents)
Self-blame or thinking they are responsible for what happened.	
Physical	
Fatigue, difficulty sleeping	Decreased or increased appetite
Agitation	Easily startled
Increased activity level/hyperactive	Bed wetting
Physical complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches)	
Behaviors	
Crying, whining, screaming	Refusal to attend school or day care
Trembling	Difficulty getting along with siblings and parents
Clinging to parents and caregivers	Using drugs and alcohol
Aggressive or disruptive behavior, temper tantrums	Re-living events through play (young children)
Withdrawn	Asking a lot of questions or telling stories related to event
Avoiding people, places, situations	Argumentative, defiant
Regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, bedwetting, not wanting to sleep alone)	

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Helping Children in Times of Stress

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“Sometimes the questions are complicated
and the answers are simple.” ~Dr. Sues



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Developmental Considerations That Can Affect Children's Coping

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- Ability to Reason
- Effects of Uncertainty
- Impact of Change
- Worldview
- Time Orientation
- Limited Life Experience
- Expression of Thoughts and Feelings

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Building Resilience in Children and Teens

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1. Make connections with others.
2. Help children and teens help others.
3. Maintain a daily routine.
4. Take a break.
5. Teach children self-care.

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Building Resilience in Children and Teens (continued)

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6. Help children and teens move toward their goals
7. Nurture a positive self-view.
8. Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook.
9. Look for opportunities for self-discovery.
10. Help children accept that change is a part of living.

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Example Scenario

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Becky, age 11, is worried about her father. He has been hospitalized and may need surgery. For the first two days Becky stayed at a friend's house, but she is now home with her mother. Becky wants to stay home from school and help her mother or go to the hospital and be with her father. She has not yet been allowed to visit with him, because he is very ill. Becky's teacher called and told Becky's mother that Becky broke into tears after receiving a C on a paper. When asked about her reaction, Becky replied, "Nothing's wrong. Leave me alone." Her teacher is concerned about her. If Becky's father has surgery, her grandmother will be coming to stay with them. Box 4.2 shows examples of how Becky's mother might help Becky build resilience during this difficult time.

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BOX 4.2: SAMPLE RESILIENCE BUILDER RESPONSES FOR EXAMPLE SCENARIO

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Resilience Builder	What You Could Do or Say
Make Connections with Others	Encourage Becky to stay in touch with the friend she had stayed with and visit with other friends, if she is interested. Let her know it is important to continue to attend school. Check into the possibility of afterschool visits with friends during the week. Ask Becky if she would like to write her father a letter that you could give him or read to him. If there are other adults Becky likes to visit, encourage those connections as well. Becky will also benefit from more attention and cuddling from you, especially at bedtime.
Help children and teens help others	Find ways for Becky to help with daily chores around the house that you might neglect while busy at the hospital. Let her know that her continuing to go to school helps you feel better, as it means Becky is not getting behind in her schoolwork and will be around friends.

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BOX 4.2: SAMPLE RESILIENCE BUILDER RESPONSES FOR EXAMPLE SCENARIO

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Resilience Builder	What You Could Do or Say
Maintain a Daily Routine	School will serve as an important continued routine for Becky. Follow other previous routines as much as possible, such as talking about her day after she comes home from school, being available to help with homework, having meals together, reading together before bedtime and maintaining bedtime routines and rituals. If there are family pets, include daily walks and feeding of the pets. Visiting or writing to her father could become part of her daily routine. If appropriate, Becky could add saying a prayer for her father each day as part of her bedtime practices.
Take a break	Encourage Becky to continue with hobbies, sports or other usual extracurricular activities. A visit to the library may give her some new books to read, perhaps including books on topics that you and Becky would enjoy reading together. Make time for recreational activities that include Becky. Encourage her to spend some time with her grandmother if and when she arrives—walking, talking, playing a game or learning about family history.

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BOX 4.2: SAMPLE RESILIENCE BUILDER RESPONSES FOR EXAMPLE SCENARIO

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Resilience Builder	What You Could Do or Say
Teach children self-care	Help Becky identify ways she can remain healthy while away from her father. Remind her of the importance of taking care of daily needs, such as brushing her teeth and bathing, and model self-care in your own actions. Also remind her that you need her to be in good shape so she can help you and her father when he returns home.
Help children and teens move toward their goals	Together, make a list of small goals, such as making a new friend at an activity where she does not know many people or learning how to make French toast or other meals, that Becky would like to accomplish while her father is in the hospital. Small goals could also include cleaning up her room, keeping up with schoolwork and/or reading a book not required for school. Help Becky find ways to plan for her father's homecoming. Consider small goals that assist with that process, such as making signs to welcome him home.

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BOX 4.2: SAMPLE RESILIENCE BUILDER RESPONSES FOR EXAMPLE SCENARIO

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Resilience Builder	What You Could Do or Say
Nurture a positive self-view	Remind Becky of other times that she has been able to handle hardships, such as when she learned to write with her left hand after she had injured her right one. Ask for her suggestions on how she might help you at home and help with her father when he returns home. Be sure to provide praise for her good ideas and, if possible, use some of them. Thank her for her contributions and willingness to think ahead. Also praise her for keeping up with her schoolwork, and acknowledge how hard this must be when she is distracted by her father's illness.
Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook	Explain the nature of Becky's father's treatment and recovery at a level she can understand, emphasizing any likelihood of a good final outcome. Talk with her about helping with plans or changes that may occur when her father returns, such as making the living room into a bedroom for a while. Discuss other changes that have taken place in your family, and how both she and the family weathered these. Becky's grandmother could share stories of changes she has seen over the years and how she managed, and that she is confident that her granddaughter has similar abilities.

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BOX 4.2: SAMPLE RESILIENCE BUILDER RESPONSES FOR EXAMPLE SCENARIO

25 Resilience Builder	What You Could Do or Say
Look for opportunities for self-discovery	Point out to Becky how she has been adjusting to changes or difficulties caused by the situation, such as being separated from her father, worrying about his health and healing, spending less time with you, having a relative stay and care for her or having difficulty concentrating at school. Thank her for her help around the house, and point out the new skills she has learned. All are signs that she is a remarkable girl, especially so in the midst of a difficult situation. Ask her if she can think of times in the past when she discovered she was able to cope or master new or difficult situations

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BOX 4.2: SAMPLE RESILIENCE BUILDER RESPONSES FOR EXAMPLE SCENARIO

26 Resilience Builder	What You Could Do or Say
Help children accept that change is part of living	Acknowledge that this circumstance has been hard on Becky and the entire family, but also help her see that you are confident that you and she will get through it. See if Becky can identify any other changes the family has worked through, large or small. Remind her that even though it is hard to not see her father and to know that he is sick, and to not have your time or attention as before, you will eventually be reunited as a family and will adjust to any changes. Remind her that change is not necessarily bad, such as when she moves up a grade in school. It can be a bit scary, but also a bit exciting, too. Monitor how she is doing, both at home and at school. Suggest that she talk to the school counselor or mental health professional if you have any significant worries about how she is doing. Extra attention, patience and love will go a long way with helping everyone with changes.

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Recognizing Symptoms of Stress in Children

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- Feelings
- Thoughts
- Behaviors
- Physical Conditions
- Spiritual Life

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Psychological First Aid Adapting PFA for Children

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PFA is a set of actions that can offer immediate support for people who need help. We can also help children cope with the stresses in their lives by providing them with PFA that has been adjusted to their developmental level.

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Psychological First Aid Set of Actions

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1. Observe and be aware.
2. Make a connection.
3. Assist with basic needs.
4. Listen.
5. Give realistic reassurance.
6. Encourage positive coping.
7. Help children connect with others.
8. Give accurate and timely information.
9. Use referral resources for extra support.
10. End the conversation.

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PFA Considerations Related to Children

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- Children are sensitive to your non-verbal behaviors.
- Adults need to be sensitive to children's non-verbal behaviors.
- Adjust your actions to the child's ability to understand.
- Be patient.
- Repeat your reassurance.

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