

Teacher Information Resource

Dealing with Dying and Anticipatory Grief

Society has a strange way of telling its children about life. Death is excluded. We think that by omission we can let children keep their innocence of life. In fact, we are keeping them from truly understanding life. Statistics indicate that one of every six children will lose one parent through death before they reach age eighteen. A teacher must provide support and guidance for that child. When a parent or family member is suffering from a terminal illness, the teacher must deal with the child's anticipation of loss and his/her passage through various stages of denial, anger of acceptance.

What do I do?

- Inform the principal.
- Together with the family, establish an agreement around the issue of confidentiality.
- Share information and develop strategies through the school support team.
- Continually remind yourself that the child will go through feelings of helplessness, ambivalence, guilt, anger and depression
- Each person's grief is unique and a child's home environment and upbringing will bear most significantly on his/her ability to cope.
- A good means of allowing the child to deal with his/her feelings and discover normalcy is to provide story books dealing with loss, illness, anticipatory grief and death. This "bibliotherapeutic" process consists of three stages:
 1. Identification – the reader identifies with the main character.
 2. Catharsis – as a result of the identification there is release of emotional and psychological tension.
 3. Insight – new insight into the reader's problem is gained via the process of "working through".
- Through a teacher's modeling of appropriate grieving behaviour, permission and support is given legitimizing the child's grief.
- If a child cannot or will not talk about his/her loss, respect that right. Provide other avenues to express what he/she feels e.g. clay, dance to music, write a story or poem, physical activity.

- Guilt is normal – talk to the child about it.
- Be aware of the child’s developmental stage and intellectual and emotional limitations.
- Encourage the child to take care of him/herself – eat properly, get enough sleep and exercise.
- Help the child break down the mourning experience into parts so that he/she can deal with it an assimilate it a little at a time.
- Give hope and encouragement. Life goes on. Encourage the child to remember the happy moments and to cherish them. No one can take away his/her memories.