



CLASSROOM GRIEF RESPONSE PACKET

**A GENTLE GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING
GRIEVING CHILDREN AT SCHOOL.**

- **PRACTICAL LANGUAGE**
- **CLASSROOM SUPPORTS**
- **PRINTABLE TOOLS**



WHEN GRIEF COMES TO SCHOOL

A Grieving child may walk back into the same classroom, but school may not feel the same.

Grief does not stay home when a child returns to school. It can arrive quietly—in a backpack, beside a math worksheet, in the middle of lunch, or just before the bell rings.

Some days, a student may want to talk. Other days, they may need routine, space, movement, reassurance, or help remembering what comes next. Their needs may change from one hour to the next.

Your role is not to make grief disappear or to have perfect words. A steady, caring adult can help school feel safer while a child carries something very hard.



The goal is not to fix grief.

The goal is to help the child feel supported while it is here.

KEEP IN MIND

1

Grief may look like sadness—but also anger, silliness, fatigue, forgetfulness, withdrawal, physical complaints, or seeming “fine”.

2

A child’s needs and reactions can change from day to day, or even hour to hour

3

Connection, predictability, and simple choices often matter more than finding exactly the right thing to say.

WHAT GRIEF CAN LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

Grief does not always look like sadness.

At school, grief can show up in a child's body, behavior, attention, relationships, and learning. These responses are not proof of grief on their own—but a change may be a cue to slow down, check in and offer support.

ATTENTION & LEARNING



- Forgets directions or materials
- Stares off or struggles to begin
- School performance becomes inconsistent

BODY & ENERGY



- Headaches, stomachaches, or fatigue
- Restlessness or difficulty settling
- More visits to the nurse or bathroom

BIG OR SHIFTING FEELINGS



- Irritability, anger, tears, or worry
- Reactions feel bigger than expected
- Small changes become overwhelming

ROUTINE & CONTROL



- Repeats questions or seeks certainty
- Becomes rigid about routines
- Feels distressed when plans change

CONNECTION & REASSURANCE



- Withdraws or avoids peers
- Stays close to trusted adults
- Worries about separation or safety

PLAY, LAUGHTER, OR “FINE”



- Participates, jokes, plays or succeeds
- May appear unchanged to others
- Visible joy does not mean grief is gone

**LOOK FOR PATTERNS,
NOT A PERFECT
CHECKLIST**

Notice what is new, intensified, or making the school day harder.
Stay curious about what the behavior may be communicating.

WHAT TO SAY – AND WHAT TO SKIP

You do not need perfect words. Clear, caring language is enough.

Grieving children often hear phrases meant to comfort than may confuse, minimize, or close the conversation. Simple language can acknowledge what happened while leaving room for the child's own feelings and needs.

WHAT TO SAY

"I'm so sorry. I'm glad you're here."

"You don't have to talk. I'm here if you want to."

"It makes sense that today feels hard."

"Would you like to stay here, take a short break, or check in with [trusted adult]?"

"I can explain that again. We can take one step at a time."

WHAT TO SKIP

"Everything happens for a reason"

"They're in a better place."

"Be strong."

"I know exactly how you feel."

"At least..." or "It's time to get back to normal."



WHEN TALKING ABOUT DEATH

Use clear, concrete words such as **died** and **death**, while respecting the family's language and beliefs. Avoid euphemisms a child may take literally, such as **went to sleep**, **lost**, or **went away**.

SUPPORTING A GRIEVING STUDENT DURING THE SCHOOL DAY

Small, predictable adjustments can make school feel more manageable.

Support does not have to be complicated or highly visible. Thoughtful flexibility can reduce pressure while helping a student stay connected to learning, routines, and the classroom community.

1

KEEP ROUTINES PREDICTABLE

Preview changes when possible. Name what will happen next. Familiar structure can feel grounding.

2

ADJUST THE WORKLOAD

Shorten assignments, offer extra time, break work into steps, or provide another way to show learning.

3

CREATE A PRIVATE BREAK PLAN

Agree on a discreet signal, a safe place to go, who will check in, and how the student can return.

4

CHECK IN WITHOUT SPOTLIGHTING

Use a quiet, brief check-in. Offer choices instead of requiring the student to explain or talk in front of others.

5

ANTICIPATE HARD MOMENTS

Family projects, books, holidays, anniversaries, and unexpected reminders may be difficult. Give advance notice and alternatives when possible.

6

KEEP CONNECTION AT THE CENTER

Help the student identify trusted adults. Coordinate with caregivers and school support staff so the child does not have to retell the story.

**FLEXIBILITY IS SUPPORT,
NOT LOWERED CARE**

Adjust expectations without removing belonging, dignity, or opportunities to participate. Revisit supports often; what helps today may change.



WHEN GRIEF HITS DURING CLASS

A hard moment does not need to become a public one.

Grief can arrive suddenly — after a reminder, a question, a noise, a transition, or seemingly out of nowhere. A calm, private response can reduce pressure and help the student regain choice and a sense of control.

1

PAUSE AND APPROACH QUIETLY

Lower your voice. Move alongside the student rather than standing over them. Avoid calling attention from across the room.

2

NAME WHAT YOU NOTICE — NOT WHY

Try: “I notice this feels hard right now.” The student does not need to explain what caused the moment.

3

OFFER TWO SIMPLE CHOICES

Offer a reduced demand, the agreed break space, or a check-in with a trusted adult. Too many questions can add pressure.

4

PROTECT THE RETURN

Help the student rejoin without an explanation or apology. Quietly recap what was missed and check in again later.



TRY THIS

“You can stay here quietly, take your planned break, or check in with [name]. You do not have to explain. I’ll help you know what comes next.”

**REGULATE FIRST,
PROBLEM-SOLVE LATER.**

When a student is overwhelmed, reduce words and demands. Follow the student’s agreed support plan. If there is an immediate safety concern, follow school crisis procedures and contact the designated support person.

COMMUNICATING WITH HOME

A brief, specific message can build trust without making families manage the classroom from afar.

Caregivers can help the school understand patterns, language, and upcoming reminders. School communication should offer useful observations, invite partnership, and protect the student's privacy.

1

SHARE WHAT YOU OBSERVED

Name the context, what you noticed, the support offered, and what happened next. Describe; do not diagnose or assign meaning.

2

ASK WHAT WOULD HELP

Ask about preferred language, meaningful dates, helpful routines, and how the family would like school to communicate.

3

CLOSE THE LOOP

Name the next step and when you will follow up. Coordinate through one point person when possible so families are not repeating the same information.

SAMPLE MESSAGE HOME

Hi [name], I wanted to let you know that [student] had a hard moment during [context] today. We offered [support], and [what happened next]. No response is needed right away. Is there anything you would like us to know or do tomorrow? We'll continue to support [student] and will follow up [when/how].

COMMUNICATE CARE, NOT SURVEILLANCE

Share enough to support continuity and trust. Avoid sending a play-by-play of every emotion or asking a caregiver to solve what happened at school. Follow school policy for documentation and urgent concerns.



A GENTLE CHECK-IN

Connection can be offered without requiring conversation.

Check in privately, at a predictable time when possible. Ask permission, use one simple question, and leave room for the student to answer in a way that feels manageable — or not answer yet.

START WITH PERMISSION

“Is now an okay time for a quick check-in? You can talk, point, write, draw or pass.”

TALK OR POINT

Use a word, number, face, or gesture. A full explanation is not required.



NOTICE YOUR BODY

The student might notice feeling tight, heavy, tired, wiggly, numb, or something else.



WRITE OR DRAW

Offer paper, a private note, or a quick sketch when speaking feels like too much.



ONE QUESTION IS ENOUGH

“How is today feeling so far?”

“Would it help to have company, a break, a smaller step, or space?”

“Is anything making school harder right now?”

“What would make the next part of the day feel more manageable?”

PASS IS A VALID ANSWER

A check-in is an invitation, not a test. Keep the door open, follow through on the choices you offer, and try again another time without pressure.

MY CLASSROOM SUPPORT PLAN

A simple plan can make hard moments feel less uncertain.

Create this plan with a student, caregiver, and school time. Offer choices, write down what is realistic, and review the plan as needs change.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Grown-up(s) helping: _____

WHEN SCHOOL FEELS HARD, ADULTS MIGHT NOTICE

THINGS THAT MAY MAKE SCHOOL HARDER

WHAT HELPS ME STAY CONNECTED

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ A smaller first step | ☐ Extra time |
| ☐ A quieter seat | ☐ Directions one at a time |
| ☐ Headphones or less noise | ☐ Water or movement |
| ☐ Writing or Drawing | ☐ A brief check-in |
| ☐ Something else: _____ | |

MY PRIVATE BREAK PLAN

My signal:

Where I can go:

Who will check in:

How I will return:

WORDS THAT HELP

It helps when adults say:

Please avoid:

MY SUPPORT PEOPLE

Name /Role: _____

Name /Role: _____

Review this plan on: _____

THIS PLAN CAN CHANGE

What helps today may be different tomorrow. Revisit the plan after transitions, difficult dates, or whenever the student asks.



KEEP THIS CLOSE – TEACHER QUICK REFERENCE

When the moment is hard, return to a few steady practices.

NOTICE

- Changes in attention, memory, energy, or schoolwork
- Physical complaints, tiredness, withdrawal, irritability, or tears
- Repeated questions, increased worry, or changes near reminders

SAY

- “I’m glad you’re here.”
- “You don’t have to explain.”
- “It makes sense this feels hard.”
- “Would you like [choice] or [choice]?”

DO NOW

- Approach privately and lower your voice
- Reduce words and immediate demands
- Offer two simple choices
- Follow the agreed plan and protect the return

SKIP

- Public check-ins or requests to explain
- “Why” questions when the student is overwhelmed
- Forced talking, euphemisms, platitudes, or “at least”
- Promising a support that is not available

PLAN

- Keep routines predictable and preview changes
- Agree on a private signal, safe place, and trusted adult
- Build in flexibility and a clear return plan
- Coordinate one communication point with home

GET MORE SUPPORT

- Consult the designated school support team when distress persists, functioning changes, or the plan is not enough
- For an immediate safety concern, follow school crisis procedures and contact the designated support person.

**BE STEADY. BE SPECIFIC.
OFFER CHOICE. KEEP
THE DOOR OPEN.**

You do not have to fix grief. Your calm presence and follow-through matter.

