

# Back to School: Grief in the Classroom



At the beginning of each school year, we invite the children and teens enrolled in the ongoing grief support groups to share with one another the struggles they face at school regarding their grief journey. We tell them that the information that they offer will be shared with the school personnel that attend the Good Grief workshops at Bo's Place. They love the fact that they get the chance to educate their teachers and school officials.

- **What Children and Teens Want from their Schools:**

Kids tell us that they want the death of their family member to be recognized at school but in a private way. They appreciate caring staff who reach out to them sincerely, quietly and confidentially. Children have told us that they would talk to the counselors, principals and school social workers. Several children and teens shared that they experienced support and comfort in very meaningful ways from various school staff members.

Some appreciate the distraction that school work provides from their grief, and others are spurred on by their tragic life events and make a concerted effort to achieve and do well academically. Teens share that their circle of friends becomes even more important to them, and the chance to socialize with their friends at school provides a great deal of comfort, especially when home can be a place of such sorrow.

- **What Children and Teens Don't Want from their Schools:**

Children and teens don't want increased attention because of their loss. Those that have gained popularity or been recognized because of their family's tragedy have shared that this "fame" has been hurtful. Some said that they would talk with a teacher or other staff members but were unsure who they could trust because they knew that they gossiped. More than one child shared they had talked privately to a school staff member about their family member's death, but their conversation was "leaked" not only to other school staff but to students, and that was hurtful. Several children shared stories of being teased and made fun of because a family member had died.

- **What Schools Can Do:**

Schools can support bereaved students and their families by providing structure, routine, and a safe person and place for a child to talk to when the need arises. Children and teens will confide in an adult they trust, which may or may not be the school counselor. Children will turn to someone they have a relationship with, which may be a favorite teacher, school nurse, coach or club sponsor. Teachers can prepare their classes for a child's return following the death of a family member by giving them guidance of what's okay to say and not to say. Schools can create a plan with the bereaved child and her parent(s) that addresses the child's academic and emotional needs so that she can be successful at school. School success enhances a child's self-esteem and sense of competency, two qualities often negatively impacted by grief.

