



FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND ADULT CAREGIVERS

Back to School with Grief

A clear, compassionate guide to help a grieving student feel steady, safe, and connected, without putting them on the spot.

A quick guide to grief

Grief is the natural response to a meaningful loss. Feelings rise and fall. Children often move in and out of grief across a single day.

Traumatic grief means trauma reactions to the death are interfering with grieving. For signs, trigger planning, and school strategies, see *the separate Traumatic Grief* [handout](#).

What you may notice

- Swings in energy or mood
- Trouble focusing, forgetfulness
- Clinginess, irritability, or shutdown
- Dates, songs, or smells spark memories

Developmental tips by grade band

K to 2 — big feelings, concrete thinking, separation worries. What helps: picture schedule, simple choices, very short routines.

Grades 3 to 5 — questions about cause, guilt, trouble finishing steps. What helps: short written lists, a class job, chunking.

Middle school (6 to 8) — mood shifts, peer sensitivity, push and pull with adults. What helps: planner checks, private break signal, movement options.

High school (9 to 12) — sleep changes, workload stress, motivation shifts. What helps: co planning the week, flexible deadlines near hard dates.

Language you can use

"The plan changed. Here is what we will do. First..., then..."

Regulation: helping the body feel safe enough

Adults go first (co regulation)

- Soft tone, slower speech
- Fewer words, clear choices
- Name the feeling, offer the next step

Teach when calm

Practice briefly at non stressful times so the skill is ready when big feelings show up.

One minute resets

- **Belly breath:** in for 4, out for 6
- **Grounding:** name 5 things you see
- **Tapping:** hand to heart, 30 seconds
- **Sip of water,** small snack if allowed
- **Movement:** wall push or brief hallway walk

Caution

Do not force eye contact or touch. Offer choice and consent.

Remembrance: honor the bond, protect privacy

At home

- Light a candle or speak a line at dinner
- Listen to a favorite song
- Memory jar with short notes
- Faith or cultural practices if wanted

At school

- Private keepsake in a pocket
- Choice to step out briefly if a memory hits
- Calm corner "remembrance box" for private notes
- Staff protect privacy; no required public sharing

Build the team & school supports

- Caregiver, teacher, counselor, nurse, trusted adults
- Share a one page plan: signals for breaks, preferred supports
- Short weekly check in during the first months back

School supports to ask about

- Flexible deadlines around hard dates
- Option to test in a quiet space
- Arrival check in
- Calm corner access and a hall pass card
- Plan for common triggers (seat away from loud doors/windows; opt out of graphic media)
- If needs stay high, ask about a 504 plan (your counselor can explain how to start an evaluation)

Eligibility note (Section 504)

Grief alone does not automatically qualify a student for a 504 plan. Eligibility under Section 504 depends on whether a physical or mental impairment substantially limits a major life activity (for example, learning, concentrating, or thinking). You can request the evaluation in writing through the school counselor.

Words that help

“Welcome. I am glad you are here. Here is the plan.”

“I see this is hard. Let us take sixty seconds to reset.”

“Would you like to tell, write, draw, or pass?”

“What went okay today, and what would help tomorrow?”

Pocket tools you can use today

- **Student Pocket Coping Plan:** three steps that help, where to go, who to ask.
- **Calm corner at home:** soft seat, timer, water, simple menu—breathe, ground, stretch, draw, remembrance.

When to seek extra help

Some signs can be part of normal grief. Seek extra help if they keep going, get stronger, or make daily life hard.

- Strong feelings most days for 2+ weeks that make school or home hard.
- Sleep very disrupted most nights for 2+ weeks.
- Recurring intrusive images/ nightmares or intense avoidance of reminders.
- Safety concerns: talk about wanting to die, self harm, alcohol/drug use, or you are worried about safety.

Get support

Talk with your school counselor or pediatrician. In the U.S., call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline). If there is immediate danger, call 911.

Quick school plan sketch

Student

name _____ **Grade**

_____ **Teacher** _____

Signals I will use for a break (hand signal, card, or planner note)

What helps me first

Where I can go _____

Adults who can help

Important dates to know
