

Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Teacher or Classmate...



Children spend a great deal of their time in preschool with teachers and other children. Even at the earliest of ages, young children develop meaningful relationships with their classmates. Teachers have important roles in the lives of children and, when they are suddenly absent for a long period from school, a child suffers a loss. It is helpful to explain to a child if a teacher is leaving due to changing schools, classrooms, or even leaving the job altogether. Classmates and friends often move away for various reasons. Preparing a child for this change will pave the way to a smooth transition.

However, what can be done to help a child cope when a teacher or classmate dies?

- Make sure the families of the children are aware of what transpired so they can be ready to answer questions. Most parents will want to be the person that tells their child. Guide them as to how to best answer the child's questions. The child will undoubtedly ask the same questions many times over.
- Directors should provide guidance and support for the staff.
- Consistent information should be provided throughout the center.
- Talk to the affected class before talking to the rest of the children. Let parents know when this will occur as they may wish to be present.
- Answer the children's questions with facts and sensitivity.
- Use simple, concrete language.
- Be prepared for children to feel shock and anger.
- Explain why the person died and reassure children that it is unlikely to happen to them.
- Avoid giving unnecessary information that would distress or confuse the children. Protect them from pictures or media displays of injuries or bodies.
- If you cry, make no apology for it. If you become overwhelmed by your emotions, seek a replacement for a time.
- The grieving process may take many months. Be prepared.
- Do not avoid talking about, or acknowledging, the death and life of the classmate or teacher. Look for ways to celebrate the memories!
- Be respectful and mindful of the religious and cultural beliefs of the other people affected.
- Do not dictate to the child how he or she *should* feel.
- Share this tip sheet with families in your program because children will need support at home as well as at school!

Ways children can take a responsive and active role in what has occurred:

- Plant a tree or flowers in memory of their classmate or teacher.
- Make a group scrapbook and give it to the family.
- Create drawings or write letters to the family of the teacher or classmate.
- Read age-appropriate books about losing a loved one.