



# What Not to Say

## Take-Home Message

Many school professionals worry they may say the wrong thing to grieving students and make matters worse. Understanding what not to say will help you be more confident and effective when you reach out to students. The suggestions can help you support grieving children.

## How to Act

Here are some behaviors that will increase children’s comfort, sense of safety, and ability to express themselves.

- Be present and authentic. Keep the focus on the student. Offer supportive statements that honestly reflect both your relationship with the deceased and your sense of the student’s response.
- Listen more, talk less. Keep your own comments brief. Ask open-ended questions to help students discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- Avoid trying to “cheer up” students or their families. Grief is painful. Attempts to cheer people up or bring focus to the good things in their lives are likely to communicate that you don’t want to hear students or their families talk about their pain.
- Accept expressions of emotion. Expressions of sadness, anger, selfishness, or confusion are common in grieving children. These are an important part of the process. When children hear they should “toughen up” or “be strong for their families” they are less likely to fully express their feelings of grief.
- Show empathy. Reflect back what you hear students say and the actions you observe. Use compassion. Avoid judgment.
- Step in to stop harmful actions when safety is a concern.



It’s important to let children express their feelings of grief. Sometimes these can be quite dramatic—shouting, crying, kicking the floor. It’s also appropriate to stop behaviors that may be harmful to the children, to others or to property.

## What Not to Say

Many common and well-intentioned statements are not helpful to grieving children and their families. Here are some comments to avoid, and suggestions for what to say instead.

Don’t worry if you’ve used these statements in the past. Children are very forgiving as long as they feel valued and supported. They hear our concern more than our exact words.

Don’t Say This	Say This Instead
“I know just what you’re going through.” You cannot know this. Everyone’s experience of grief is unique.	“Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?”
“You must be incredibly angry.” It is not helpful to tell people how they are feeling or ought to feel. It is better to ask. People in grief often feel many different things at different times.	“Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?”
“This is hard. But it’s important to remember the good things in life, too.” This kind of statement is likely to quiet down true expressions of grief. When people are grieving, it’s important they be allowed to experience and express whatever feelings, memories, or wishes they’re having.	“What kinds of memories do you have about the person who died?”
“At least he’s no longer in pain.” Efforts to “focus on the good things” are more likely to minimize the student or family’s experience (see above). Any statement that begins with the words “at least” should probably be reconsidered.	“What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your loved one died?”

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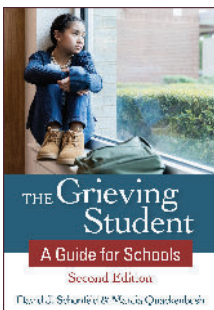
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<p>“I lost both my parents when I was your age.”</p> <p>Avoid comparing your losses with those of students or their families. These types of statements may leave children feeling that their loss is not as profound or important.</p>	<p>“Tell me more about what this has been like for you.”</p>
<p>“You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.”</p> <p>Grieving children are often told they shouldn’t express their feelings. This holds children back from expressing their grief and learning to cope with these difficult feelings.</p>	<p>“How is your family doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?”</p>
<p>“My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling.”</p> <p>It is not useful to compare losses. Keep the focus on grieving children and their families.</p>	<p>“I know how I’ve felt when someone I loved died, but I don’t really know how you’re feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?”</p>

## Expect a Range of Responses

The most important thing you can do is simply be with students while they are grieving. Witness their distress. Listen to what they have to say. Tolerate silence when they’re not ready to speak.

Suspend judgment about how students “should” cope with their situations and stay open to the wide range of responses children may have. Let them experience their grief in their own way. Let them know you will be there with them. While it’s important to intervene when you think children may hurt themselves or others, most of the time children are able to express intense feelings without danger.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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