

Bereavement Counseling Within Schools:  
A Closer Look

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## Bereavement within Schools

### **Introduction**

Death can happen to anyone at anytime. In fact, “most children experience the death of a family member or friend by the time they complete high school; and one in 20 children face the death of a parent by age 16” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In this paper I am going to compare how an individual grieves a loss of a loved one and how they are impacted by the school and when a member of the school dies and the impact that has on the school. For example, if an individual student lost their mother it is handled much differently by the school than if a student or staff member of that school dies. I feel this is an interesting view because both are issues that many schools experience, yet one is handled in a micro way and the other is handled in a macro way.

Throughout this paper you will read about the impacts of individual and school wide bereavement. In addition you will read about an intervention that focus' on individuals that have lost a loved one compared to school wide/grade wide bereavement interventions after a school member dies and the past research on those interventions. Lastly, you will see a lesson plan on implementing the intervention that focus' on individuals that have lost a loved one and its impact on the school setting and how a social worker would test the effectiveness of that program.

### **Identify and Describe Condition (individual affected by death)**

After an individual experiences a death of a loved one, such as parent or sibling, several changes often take place. Depending on the age and development of the child this can manifest or present in different ways. For example, an elementary school age child will often ask questions to their teacher and seek to try to understand the death. Elementary children that have just experienced a death may have behavioral difficulties, decreased concentration, poor school

performance, irritability, and be withdrawn in class and with friends. Middle school aged children have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death in a more complex way than elementary aged children. This may result in a variety of feelings and emotions for these children, such as acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, guilt and depression. High School age children usually completely grasp the concept of death and do not seek others for understanding. However, high school age children may reach out to friends or teachers for support and comfort. On the other hand, high school aged children may become very withdrawn from social interaction and remain independent. Losing a loved one at this point in a child's life could result in depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2015). Multiple people can be affected by these students difficulties, such as teachers, friends, and of course the child themselves.

When children experience a death of a loved, one school-based support is crucial. Teachers and other administration can help ease the stress and sadness that a child may be experiencing by understanding grief is a process and remaining supportive. As a social worker it is important that you inform and educate the teachers and other staff prior the child's return to school and constantly check-in with both the student and teachers to make sure everything is running smoothly, or as smooth as possible in this tough time after the child comes back to school. Also, it is important for teachers and other staff to be aware of their own grief and how that may affect your interaction with the grieving student. Being a teacher that this student trusts and goes to for support will possibly give a child motivation to attend that class and hopefully make school a positive aspect of that child's life. Lastly, it is important to understand that children that are grieving need consistency and if they remain occupied they will not constantly think about the death.

Peers can have a huge affect on a child grieving the loss of a loved one. However, many children may be scared or upset in trying to help other children dealing with grief because they may have little or no experience with death and grieving. However as a social worker you can educate the peers of the child that lost a loved one and help them support the child in the grieving process. Children need help in communicating condolence messages to a peer that has lost a loved one. For example, social workers may need to help children in what to say when they first see the child that lost a loved one or when that individual begins talking about the person that died. Also, children often need help anticipating some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently than before the death (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003).

#### **Identify and Describe Condition (school affected by death)**

When a member of a school dies, either a student or staff member, it has an impact on the entire school. A death of a school member could impact the students and staff, and it could be so significant that it overwhelms the members of the school so much that the usual effective coping skills do not work. When a member of the school dies it is important that the social worker considers three variables to determine the degree of trauma that the school may experience. The first variable is who. The number of people the student or staff member that has died knew at the school and his/her length of time at the school. The next variable is how. Under what circumstances did the student or staff member die? Often times the impact is much different if the death was by suicide compared to a death by natural causes. The last variable is where. For example, a death within the school or due to school related activity often results in more trauma for the surviving school members than if it happened outside of the school (Piechowski, P.).

As stated above, it is important to take into account the age and developmental level of the children that are experiencing the death of a fellow student or staff member. At the elementary level it is going to be handled differently than in a high school. With younger children they may have a hard time understanding why the individual died while older children search for meaning to why the individual died. This is important to remember as the school social worker because different interventions will and should be implemented.

After the death of a school member, each administrator has a different role. First the superintendent has an incredibly important role. First, the superintendent needs to publicly show support. Second, the superintendent needs to respond quickly to the requests of the school that the deceased was a member. Third, the superintendent needs to address the media requests. Fourth, the superintendent must communicate with other district personnel and the board. Lastly, the superintendent must monitor the intervention process and implement a crisis plan (Piechowski, P.).

When the principal first talks to the superintendent about the death it is important that they verify the facts concerning the death; including who has died. Also, the principal needs to quickly assess the impact this death will have on the school community, and begin to brainstorm school wide interventions. The principal will then take the lead in the activation of the protocol and the process through which students will be notified about the death. Also the principal should call members of the Crisis Management Team just in case a population of the students struggle greatly with the death. The principal should also notify the entire staff about how it will affect the change in the procedure of the normal school day (Piechowski, P.).

Just like the superintendent and principal, teachers and guidance counselors have an important role after a school member dies. It is important for teachers and guidance counselors

to console distraught students and show support for these children. However, sometimes teachers and guidance counselors are also extremely distraught over the death and should find help for themselves (Piechowski, P.).

The school social worker also has a very important role, possibly the most important role of all. It is the social worker's duty to educate the teachers and other staff on supporting students that are struggling with the death of either their peer or other school staff. Also, it is important that the school social worker remains open for individual sessions with students that are severely struggling with the death. Lastly, it is important that they refer individuals for additional counseling when necessary.

### **Identify Intervention (individual affect by death)**

Bereavement is a very difficult time for everyone involved, especially the children. There are many different interventions that can support children in the school setting, such as individual counseling (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Art Therapy), group counseling, or getting necessary accommodations (504). However, in my report I am going to focus on group counseling within the school setting for students that have experienced a death of a loved one. When counseling is provided in a group format there are two major benefits. First you can service a larger amount of individuals in need and the individuals within the group are with peers that have similar experiences. This is especially useful with teens that are grieving because they often feel like they are the only individual that has experienced the death of a parent or sibling.

The group model that I am going to be discussing was created and tested by Elena M. Pilato from The College at Brockport. The children that participated in the group ranged in ages from 8 to 12 years of age and have experienced the death of a loved one. This group ran for

eight consecutive weeks and every week the session lasted for an hour in duration. Each session had a different topic and I will describe each session step by step below.

Group one included an ice breaker to introduce group members to each other. Next, the pre-test survey was read out loud to the children testing their emotional well-being ((see Intervention effectiveness (individual affected by death) section)). After completing the survey the group facilitator talked about confidentiality with the group. Lastly, the group made rules and when they completed the list they all signed it. This is important because it will make the group start to gain identity (Pilato, 2008, p. 61).

Group two focused on discussing why the children were there, what loss and death means, and who is affected by loss. After the discussion activity, the children participated in an icebreaker. Before leaving session the group created a cheer. Again, this gains group identity (Pilato, 2008, p. 62).

Group three began with a quick check-in about the previous session and the feelings that it may have brought up throughout the week. Next, the group participated in an activity that had each member draw pictures of what their loss looks like and then shared with the group. Before the session ended they implemented their cheer they created last session (Pilato, 2008, p. 63).

Group four started with a quick check-in and then the group participated in the next activity of drawing a picture of their favorite memory of their lost one. Some members decided to share their drawings afterwards while others respectfully chose not to. After the drawing activity, the group did their good bye cheer and group four ended (Pilato, 2008, p. 63).

Group five consisted of a check-in and working on their memory books. During this time, group members told stories about their losses. Members ended session with their good bye cheer (Pilato, 2008, p. 64).

Group six begin like the prior meetings with a group check-in. After the check-in the group participated in a feelings activity. This activity consisted of, "eight feeling words" of fear, sad, grateful, angry, empty, confused, guilty, and shame written on paper strips on the floor. The children were asked to pick one of the feeling strips that they had felt before and explain what it was like. They ended group with their good-bye cheer (Pilato, 2008, p. 64).

Group seven began with the check-in followed by a continuance of the feelings activity from the week before. Each member of the group that participated selected a different word out of the eight that were presented last week and again discussed a time they felt like that. After this activity was completed, members participated in another activity and wrote letters to their lost one. After completing the letters the group shared the letters. The group again ended with their good bye cheer (Pilato, 2008, p. 65).

Group eight is the final group of this intervention. It began with the post-test and like the pre-test it was read to the members of the group. After the post-test was finished, the members engaged in discussion and the facilitators checked-in with the members on how they were doing. Following the check-in, the children worked on their memory books. To end the session the group members shared what they had learned, liked, and disliked from the group. Lastly, the group ended with their group cheer (Pilato, 2008, p. 65).

### **Identify Intervention (school affected by death)**

When a member of a school community dies it is often handled in a different way compared to when an individual in that school experiences a death of a loved one. Even though individual and group counseling could be effective for students greatly affected by the death, often times school wide procedures and interventions are more effective.

After the death of a member of the school community, it is important that the school administration and school social worker follow a specific procedure. After the Crisis Response



Team has drafted their action plan, a meeting with all of the staff should occur. It is important to have that meeting to discuss multiple important topics before the students return to school. These topics include but are not limited to, sharing a written statement and presentation of the circumstances of the death, preparing teachers to share the information in their home room or first period class, and presenting information about how students grieve and what behaviors might be expected. Also, within this meeting it is important to talk about maintaining routine and allowing flexibility throughout the day, allowing the students to talk about their feelings around the death is highly important. Lastly, within this meeting it is important to touch upon students that may be most affected by the death (The Dougy Center, 2016).

### **Intervention Research (individual affected by death)**

The study conducted by Elena M. Pilato was based in a city with a population of approximately 219,773 people. The racial make up of this population is as follows: 106,161 Caucasians, 84,717 African Americans, 1,033 Native Americans, 5,047 Asians, 28,032 Hispanics, and 22,815 individuals from other races. “The Municipal Reference guide further suggested that the city population consists of 61,735 individuals aged 17 and under, in which this research and agency specifically targeted and serves.” The median income for a city household was \$26,650 and the median family income was \$28,387. Lastly, “The County and City Data Book indicated that the number of violent crimes committed in the city average about 1,974, while property crimes are around 13,828 per year” (Pilato, 2008, p. 55).

Like I said above, this study involved both male and female participants between the ages of 8 and 12 years. All participants had experienced some sort of loss/grief, such as death, divorce, or incarceration in the last two years. According to the study, “all participants were referred to the group by their primary therapist, as it was up to the therapist’s discretion, the child, and the child’s parent/guardian for the child to attend the group” (Pilato, 2008, p. 56).

Also, all children involved in the study exhibited the ability to verbalize their thoughts and feelings.

This study was evaluated by testing the participants of the group with the Beck Depression Inventory for Youth (BDI-Y) pre and post-test. This test consists of twenty questions. Questions 3, 11, 13, and 15 measure a negative view of the self; while questions 1 and 20 measure a negative view of the group members world. Question 20 also measures the group member's hopelessness. These tests also consisted of questions that measured vegetative and somatic symptoms, 5 and 9, and motivational aspects of depression, 2, 4, and 16. The remaining questions tested the group member's emotional symptoms of depression (Pilato, 2008, p. 56 and 57).

According to Elena M. Pilato children that participated in the group showed decreased depression symptoms. The outcome of the research study proves the need for children to share their emotions and feelings after experiencing a loss can greatly decrease depression and hopelessness. "The results reveal that with the help of group therapy, children can decrease their symptoms of depression and can learn to cope more effectively with loss" (Pilato, 2008, p. 76).

All studies have limitations and this study is no different. First, not all group members attended session every week and at times children were distracted throughout session. Also, while the children were taking the pre and post test many of the children were going ahead and answering questions that were not read to them yet, possibly affecting the reliability of the tests. In addition to the limitations of this study, even though this study was conducted at an agency and focused on children that experienced loss in many forms not just death, it can still relate to

children in the school setting that have experienced the death of a loved one (Pilato, 2008, p. 77 and 78).

### **Intervention Research (school affected by death)**

Even though I could not find any specific studies that proved the reliability of the procedure that I presented above, multiple sources that I read had very similar procedures when a school community experiences a loss. Some of the sources that I read were:

<http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/death-impacts-your-school/> (The Dougy Center, 2016)

<http://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Crisis/crisisbook.pdf> (Piechowski, P.) ,

[http://rems.ed.gov/docs/copingw\\_death\\_studentorstaff.pdf](http://rems.ed.gov/docs/copingw_death_studentorstaff.pdf) (U.S. Department of Education,

2007), and <http://neahealthyfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/schoolcrisisguide.pdf>

(National Education Association).

### **Lesson Plan/Implementation (individual effected by death)**

Although throughout this paper I have discussed the comparison between deaths that affect a single person, such as the death of a loved one compared to a death that affects an entire school community, I am not going to discuss that in this section. In this section I am going to simply discuss how I could implement the intervention that Elena M. Pilato created in to a school setting for high schoolers. I understand that when Pilato created and evaluated her group it was not in a school setting or with children that were of high school age, however through my experience with teens dealing with grief and loss many of the activities and interventions Pilato used within the group. I also used many of the activities and interventions that Pilato used while interning at an agency that provides group counseling to grieving children. Because of this fact, I am confident that implementing a group similar to the group Pilato conducted within a high school setting will be successful as well.

<b>Counselor:</b> Kevin Hull	<b>Topic or Title of Lesson:</b> Grief and Bereavement Group	
<b>District Standard of Counselor Performance:</b> Principle I and Principle IV		
<b>Student Development Curriculum Domain</b> ( <i>circle all that apply</i> ) ACADEMIC                      CAREER <u>PERSONAL-SOCIAL</u>		
<b>Grade Level</b> ELEMENTARY                      MIDDLE <u>HIGH SCHOOL</u>		
<b>Personal/Social Development Standard:</b> <u>A</u> <u>B</u> <u>C</u>		
<b>Learning Expectations:</b> The students within this group will show decreased signs of depression and hopelessness. The student will learn to express their feelings around the death. Lastly, the student will create peer relationships who they are comfortable talking about their feelings with.		
<b>Assessments/Effectiveness testing:</b> How will you know when your students have met the Learning Expectations above?  <b>Formative:</b> Assessments that provide data (may include): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large and small group discussion, shared inquiry, think-pair-share</li> <li>• End of group evaluation of that session's activity</li> <li>• Ticket-to-leave (one word to describe the session)</li> <li>• One-sentence summary</li> </ul> <b>Summative/Unit:</b> Assessments occurring at the end of a unit, evidence of the extent to which students have mastered the unit Learning Expectations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beck Depression Inventory for Youth (BDI-Y) pre and post-test</li> <li>• Liker-type scale test</li> </ul>		
<b>Learning Activities:</b> What activities will be used to meet and apply the Learning Expectations? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawing the person that died</li> <li>• Writing letters to the person that died</li> <li>• Memory books <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Pictures</li> <li>○ Drawing</li> <li>○ Letters</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Making collages using pictures that reminded them of person that died</li> <li>• Self-care</li> <li>• Feelings word activities</li> </ul>		

**Materials:**

- Paper
- Markers
- Magazines
- Glue
- Yarn
- Uno
- Janga
- Play-duo

**Procedure** (Describe in detail the sequence of events in the lesson):

Week 1- Getting to know each other (ground rules/current self-care techniques)

Week 2- Telling our story

Week 3- Identifying and expressing feelings

Week 4- Remembering

Week 5- Family changes/identifying changes

Week 6- Guilt and anger

Week 7- Coping/self-care

Week 8- Goodbyes

Every week the social worker will start with a quick check-in with each group member before sharing with the group that week's session and activity. In addition, the social worker will bring an additional activity just in case the original activity fails. For example, in the remembering week I would present an activity like simply having the group members write a letter to the person that died and if they have trouble writing/starting their letter the social worker will provide them with an outline. In addition, in the week about identifying changes I would do an activity called "Now and Then." To end each session I would have each group member explain the group in one word, such as fun, upsetting, helpful, etc.

\*\*I used all of these activities while interning at Rick's Place without knowing they were activities on "Teen Grief Groups" by Scott Johnson but I provided his explanations below because they are worded well.

**Effectiveness of Implemented Intervention (individual)**

Even though I discussed it within the lesson plan above, I want to quickly touch upon again how the social worker will measure the effectiveness of this group. The social worker will use two methods to measure the effectiveness of this group. The first method that the social worker will use are formative methods, where the social worker will unofficially measure group

effectiveness by large and small group discussions, shared inquiry, think-pair-share, end of group evaluation, ticket-to-leave (one word to describe the session), and one-sentence summary. The second method that the social worker will use to measure effectiveness is summative methods, where the social worker will use the Beck Depression Inventory for Youth (BDI-Y) that has been proven valid and reliable (Pilato, 2008).

NOW AND THEN

Age Level: Kids and teens

Time Required: 1 hour

Materials Needed: Markers Cut up magazine Glue and paper

Goals:

1. Identify and express changes that have occurred because of death.
2. Stimulate dialogue about our feeling responses to change.

Description of Activity:

1. Draw a line down the middle of the page.
2. Have participants draw/paste pictures of their family before and after death.
3. What has changed? What is the same?

(Johnson, p. 46)

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