



Grades K–5: Grief Drawing Activity

Teachers are in a unique position to witness children struggling with grief. Whether a student has lost a parent, sibling, grandparent, or another relative, or if the student is struggling with loss on a larger scale, he or she needs opportunities to express his or her feelings and learn about grief.

This classroom activity—provided by [New York Life Foundation](#) in partnership with Scholastic—is designed to help educators support grieving students and help them find the vocabulary to communicate their feelings associated with grief. This activity is intended as a resource that teachers can draw on when they encounter grief in the classroom.

This activity may be used:

- In a small group of children who may be experiencing grief
- As part of a health and/or life skills curriculum
- As a creative activity to gain a deeper understanding of literature that touches on death or loss

Before using this activity, you may choose to review expert advice regarding grief by clicking the following links:

- [What teachers should know about how children grieve](#)
- [How to react to grieving children](#)
- [What to do when there is a loss in the school community](#)

Review the [book list](#) at the bottom of the activity for more grief resources.

DISCUSS TOGETHER

Grades K–2

For younger students, center conversations about grief around feelings of sadness. Ask students what

types of situations make them sad. Record the reasons on the board. Probable responses will be the loss of a pet or possibly a grandparent or a family member who has been forced to move away. Younger children may not yet have experienced death. You may also share a personal experience by telling about the loss of someone important to you. Be careful to keep your personal experience brief. The intention is to spark conversation, not overshadow the focus on the children's thoughts and feelings. When children do share their feelings, avoid saying "I know what you are feeling," or sharing your perspective on grief at length.

Tell students that *grief* is another word for a feeling of great sadness. Discuss the feelings and changes in behavior that children may feel when they are grieving (denial; emotional numbness; anger, irritability, and episodic rage; fear and anxiety; confusion; difficulty sleeping; physical complaints such as "stomachaches" or headaches; changes in appetite). Allow them to share feelings in their own words. Explain how important it is for grieving people of all ages to talk about their emotions.

Grades 3–5

Introduce the word *grief* around feelings of sadness. Ask students what they know about grief or sadness. Discuss the reasons that people may feel grief. Record the reasons on the board. You may also share a personal experience by telling about the loss of someone important to you. Be careful to keep your personal experience brief. The intention is to spark conversation, not overshadow the focus on the children's thoughts and feelings. When children do share their feelings, avoid saying "I know what you are feeling," or sharing your perspective on grief at length.

Ask students if they have read any stories or seen any movies that include a character losing someone close to them. Ask them to describe what happened to the characters when someone they loved died. Discuss the feelings and changes in behavior that children may feel when they are grieving (denial; emotional numbness; anger, irritability, and episodic rage; fear and anxiety; confusion; difficulty sleeping; physical complaints such as "stomachaches" or headaches; changes in appetite). Allow them to share feelings in their own words. Explain how important it is to for grieving people of all ages to talk about their emotions.

VIDEO

In a televised segment, Katie Couric speaks with Dr. Jeanette Betancourt and *Sesame Street's* Elmo about how children cope with grief. Review the video and identify segments that will help your students further understand grief. Show the selected segments to the class after your initial conversation. Extend the conversation by discussing the things Elmo learned about grief when he lost someone close to him. www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=6392732n

Optional Videos

Older and more advanced students may benefit from seeing children and parents discuss their experiences with grief. There are 11 videos in the Children & Grief library that profile people involved in grief support organizations. Videos such as "The Alcove," "The Warm Place," or "Morning Hope" provide an overview of the impact grief has on children by interviewing grieving children and parents, as well as adults who work in grief-support settings. The videos also describe the work done in these settings to help children learn to cope with grief. Some of the topics touched upon in the videos are: emotional

responses to grief, tips for dealing with grief, changes in relationships with friends and family, changes in behavior, and the impact grief has on children's lives. You can select the videos that work best in your classroom at www.scholastic.com/childrenandgrief.

ACTIVITY

Distribute large sheets of paper and pencils. Ask students to think about important moments they share with their parents. If they have trouble coming up with ideas, talk about mealtime, brushing their teeth, or bedtime. Ask them to think about special times with their grandparents. If they have trouble coming up with ideas, talk about holidays, family trips, or family get-togethers. Now ask them how they think it would feel if they had a parent, grandparent, or another family member who was missing from those moments in their lives. For younger students, this will be a class-wide discussion. Older students can separate in groups and discuss this among themselves.

Once the discussion is complete, ask the children to draw an important time of day, a holiday, or an event that would be difficult without a parent, grandparent, or other relative. If students do not feel comfortable sharing their drawings with the class, offer them the option of sharing them with only you.

For Grieving Students

If you have students who are grieving, you can encourage them to draw an image that shows their feelings. Offer artistic suggestions (e.g., abstract drawings or self-portraits) to help students get started. If students do not feel comfortable sharing their drawings with the class, offer them the option of sharing them with only you.

Grades K–2

For younger students, challenge them to relate colors and temperatures to the emotions they drew. Ask them if the emotions they drew are closer to heat or coldness. Does their grief make them think of purple, red, black, gray, or some other color?

Grades 3–5

For older students, challenge them to consider how grief relates to nature or the weather. Does the image of grief they drew have something in common with an earthquake, a snowstorm, or a hurricane? Would they compare it to a natural environment such as a desert, a jungle, a mountain, or a tundra? Have students use the connections between nature and the weather to further describe their drawings about grief.

LANGUAGE ARTS EXTENSION (optional)

Kindergarten: Have kindergarten students provide a caption for their drawing that explains how they would help a grieving classmate or friend. If the students themselves are grieving, allow them to write or discuss anything they would like in relationship to their image and their feelings.

Grades 1–2: Have students in grades 1–2 write a paragraph that shares their ideas for helping a grieving classmate or friend.

Grades 3–5: Have older students write two to three paragraphs describing:

- Possible responses to grief
- How they would help a friend or classmate who is grieving
- How they would like to be helped if they were grieving

For Grieving Students

If the students themselves are grieving, allow them to write or discuss anything they would like in relationship to the image and their grief. A few possible topics are:

- Grief feels like _____.
- The best thing someone did to help me feel better was _____.
- I like to think of my loved one doing _____.
- The thing I remember most about my loved one is _____.

FACTS ABOUT GRIEF

- Everybody grieves differently.
Source: *Death and Loss: Helping Children Manage Their Grief*
- When someone close to you dies, your emotions and behavior might change. You might sleep differently, be moodier or angrier, or feel sick. It's okay to feel this way.
Source: *Death and Loss: Helping Children Manage Their Grief*
- You can have different feelings at different times of the day. You can play and still be sad.
Source: *Between Teacher & Parent: "My Grandpa Died"*
- Everything that lives eventually dies.
Source: *How Children Understand Death*
- People who die won't come back into our lives but we can always remember them with our thoughts and actions.
Source: *How Children Understand Death*

BOOK LIST

For Educators



- *After a Loved One Dies—How Children Grieve: And How Parents and Other Adults Can Support Them* by David Schonfeld, MD, and Marcia Quackenbush, MS, MFT, CHES
- *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld, MD, and Marcia Quackenbush, MS, MFT, CHES
- *Why Did You Die? Activities to Help Children Cope With Grief and Loss* by Erika Leeuwenburgh, LPC, and Ellen Goldring, LPC
- *Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children* by Liana Lowenstein, MSW
- *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies* by Janis Silverman

For Students