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Identifying Bereaved Children At-Risk in the School System

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When a child experiences the death of a parent or sibling, family life, as once known, comes to a dramatic and often-frightening halt.

Bereaved children suddenly face myriad emotions that impact virtually all spheres of their young lives. Parents, immersed in their own psychological pain, often feel woefully inadequate to help their children wrestle with this painful, sometimes terrifying, process known as grief.

In recent years, school boards have responded to the growing needs of bereaved students and their parents by offering group-based programmes, individual counselling, as well as crisis intervention, when a tragedy impacts the school “family”. For many children, these services are more than adequate to provide the necessary ongoing support, however, there remains a small group of students who will continue to be at-risk for ongoing psychological problems as a consequence of their loss. Since school is where children spend a large portion of their waking lives, teachers and support staff are in an ideal position to observe and identify those who may be at-risk for post-bereavement complications.

With this in mind, the following list of risk factors is presented to assist in identifying bereaved children who may require further assessment or referral:

1. A dramatic change in the child’s personality or self-esteem since the loss;
2. Significant sleep disturbance, eg. tired all day, insomnia;
3. Significant loss or gaining of weight since the loss;
4. A history of tension at home prior to the loss;
6. Perceived lack of peer support;
7. Few friends, isolated, or picked-on by other children prior to the loss;
8. Multiple losses in the child’s history;
9. The presence of anxiety or panic attacks;
10. Talking about not wanting to be here or wanting to join the deceased;
11. Depressive symptoms (constant crying, distressed, upset);
12. Significant absences from school with no evidence of physical illness;
13. One or both parents experiencing significant difficulty in coping with the loss;
14. and, remarriage of a parent within one year of the death of spouse.

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Any one factor alone may increase a child's risk for experiencing significant difficulties following the death of a loved one and, obviously, the more factors present in a child's situation, the higher the risk.

Children identified as being potentially at-risk should be further assessed either through the school's counselling services, by an external mental health agency, or by a private practitioner with experience in children's grief.