

A-Z Guide for Teachers

Supporting a Student Returning to School After the Sudden and Unexpected Death of a Sibling

A practical guide to creating a compassionate, trauma-informed classroom.

Grief is not something children outgrow. It becomes part of their story.

A — Acknowledge

Recognize the child's loss. A simple, private "I'm so sorry your brother/sister died. I'm glad you're here," lets them know they are seen without putting them on the spot.

B — Be Flexible

Grief affects concentration, memory, sleep, and energy. Temporary flexibility with assignments, participation, or deadlines can make a tremendous difference.

C — Check In

Brief, consistent check-ins ("How are you doing today?") help children feel supported without requiring them to talk if they don't want to.

D — Don't Assume

Every child grieves differently. Some will cry. Others will laugh, play, or appear unaffected. All of these responses can be normal.

E — Expect Change

Academic performance, friendships, behavior, and emotions may change over weeks or months. Grief is not linear.

F — Familiar Routines

Predictable routines help children regain a sense of safety and stability after their world has changed.

G — Give Choices

Offer options when possible:

- "Would you rather work independently or with a partner?"
- "Would you like a break?"

Choice helps restore a sense of control.

H — Honor Their Sibling

If the child brings up their sibling, follow their lead. Hearing their sibling's name can be comforting.

I — Invite, Don't Insist

Let students know they are welcome to participate, but don't pressure them to share their feelings with the class.

J — Judge Less

Grief may look like irritability, withdrawal, restlessness, forgetfulness, or tears. Approach behavior with curiosity before discipline.

K — Keep Communication Open

Maintain ongoing communication with caregivers to understand changing needs and share observations.

L — Listen

Children often need someone to listen more than someone to provide answers.

M — Memories Matter

Allow opportunities for the child to talk about their sibling if they choose. Remembering is not harmful—it is often healing.

N — Notice Milestones

Birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and school events may intensify grief. Ask parents/caregivers about important dates—such as the sibling's birthday or anniversary—and make a confidential note so you can provide additional understanding, flexibility, or a simple check-in.

O — Offer Safe Spaces

Identify a trusted adult or quiet place where the student can go if emotions become overwhelming.

P — Patience

Grief has no timeline. Support may be needed long after others expect the child to be "back to normal."

Q — Questions

Children may ask difficult questions about death. Answer honestly, simply, and in an age-appropriate manner. If you don't know the answer, it's okay to say so.

R — Relationships

Help classmates understand how to be supportive while respecting the student's privacy.

S — Say Their Sibling's Name

Don't be afraid to mention the sibling if appropriate. It communicates that their sibling is remembered.

T — Triggers

Classroom activities involving family trees, siblings, holidays, or special persons may unexpectedly trigger grief. Consider offering alternative options.

U — Understand Grief Is Ongoing

The student may seem okay one day and struggle the next. Healing is not a straight line.

V — Validate Feelings

"There isn't a right or wrong way to feel."

Validation builds trust.

W — Watch for Changes

Notice significant shifts in behavior, attendance, social withdrawal, anxiety, or academic performance, and collaborate with caregivers and school support staff.

X — eXtra Support

Know when additional support from the school counselor, psychologist, or community resources may be helpful.

Y — Your Presence Matters

You don't need perfect words. Consistent kindness and compassion often matter most.

Z — Zero Expectations for "Getting Over It"

Children do not "move on" from the death of a sibling. Instead, they learn to carry their grief while continuing to grow.

Five Things Every Teacher Should Remember

- ★ You don't need to fix the grief.
 - ★ You don't need to have the perfect words.
 - ★ Your classroom can become a place of safety.
 - ★ Small acts of kindness are often remembered for years.
 - ★ The sibling who died will always matter.
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Finding the Right Words

Instead of saying...

Consider saying...

✗ "Everything happens for a reason."	✓ "I'm so sorry."
✗ "At least you have your other siblings."	✓ "I'm thinking about you."
✗ "They're in a better place."	✓ "I'm here if you need anything."
✗ "You'll get over it."	✓ "Would you like to take a break?"
✗ "Be strong for your parents."	✓ "Tell me about your sibling, if you'd like."

Quick Reference for Teachers

When a student returns after the death of a sibling...

- ☐ Privately acknowledge their loss.
- ☐ Ask caregivers about important dates (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays).
- ☐ Identify a trusted adult at school.
- ☐ Offer flexibility with assignments.
- ☐ Check in regularly.
- ☐ Watch for changes over time.

"One caring teacher can make a lasting difference in a grieving child's life."

The SUDC Foundation offers free educational resources to support families, educators, and schools following the sudden death of a child.

Available resources include:

- ★ **Sibling Toolkit** – Guidance and activities to support grieving siblings.
- ★ **Children's Grief Book Recommendations** – Curated book lists for children, teens, and adults.
- ★ **Educational Resources** – Information about Sudden Unexpected Death in Childhood (SUDC) and supporting bereaved families.
- ★ **Family Support Resources** – Information about our complimentary trauma and grief informed support programs and services available through the SUDC Foundation.

To access these resources, please visit:
sudc.org

