



Back To School with Grief and COVID-19:

A Resource Guide for Teachers and School Staff



Students are going back to school this year with a backpack full of feelings. Some may have been impacted by illness, death, or other pandemic related losses. Some are happy to return but many are afraid of going back to school because of worries about getting the virus. The same could be said of school staff. Some of you may have lost family members, friends or coworkers during the pandemic. In addition you are also dealing with the challenge of teaching virtually and concerns about keeping yourself and your students safe from the virus. Imagine created this tip sheet to help support you in creating an emotionally supportive school climate.

NORMALIZE IT

Students take their cues from teachers and school staff. It is important to normalize that it is okay to feel worried, scared, sad or uncertain about going back to school or learning remotely.



- Transitions are difficult. Normalize that coming back to school and adapting to the new rhythm of school may be challenging.
- Students who have experienced a death before or during the pandemic will have feelings of grief. Don't set limits on how long a student is impacted by this loss. Their ongoing grief is normal.
- Help students identify and name their feelings while also helping them understand the connection between their feelings and their actions, "You hit two kids at recess. You can't hit other students, but I know there's a good reason why you acted that way. I wonder if you are feeling mad about something."
- Help your students make a list of all the ways they can express their feelings: talking, writing in a journal, using art supplies etc. Consider creating lessons that allow for the expression of feelings. Find teachable moments in your curriculum to normalize feelings.
- Talk about what has changed. Students have experienced a myriad of losses during this pandemic. If they are going back to school after someone died, talk about what will be different for them. Allow them to have space to talk about the good changes and the hard changes.
- Normalize that unexpressed feelings can make it difficult to learn, complete assignments and pay attention. Affirm students for expressing feelings and seeking out support.

INCREASE THEIR SAFETY

Students are feeling high levels of fear about their physical health as well as concerns about their emotional safety. In addition to fears about the virus and grief due to losses, any number of challenges can cause students to have ongoing stress and mental health challenges. Help students make a plan for how they can tackle those difficult situations.



- Help students identify the supportive adults in their lives at school, in the community and at home.
- Whenever possible, empower your students. Give them age appropriate choices.
- Students may need breaks from the intensity of instruction.
- Students who have experienced a death may find it helpful to keep a special object that they can carry with them throughout the day to help soothe them during difficult days.
- Foster connection. If students are remotely learning, encourage them to plan time for interaction and play with friends or peers
- Grieving students benefit from having a plan so they can leave the classroom without having to explain or ask permission. Have an agreed upon person or place to go to.
- Have students consider what they do not have control over. This is a very empowering exercise for students who have a lot of worries and fears.
- Be that safe, supportive presence for your students.

SEE BEHAVIOR AS INFORMATION

Students will often tend to act out their feelings rather than express them appropriately. Being able to express feelings is a learned developmental skill that is challenging for many students, especially those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. The reason for this can be low frustration tolerance, inability to self-regulate, intensity of the emotion, multiple stressors or the lack of feeling safe to express those feelings.



- Avoid judging your student’s behavior and instead listen to their behavior. Their behavior is telling you something about them that they can’t tell you any other way.
- Good behavior can often be a way of hiding a lot of feelings. Consider a student who is overly helpful or who is focused on achievement as a way of not dealing with their feelings.
- Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with you?” considering wondering, “What happened. There is always a good reason why a child behaves the way they do.
- Don’t ask a student, “Why did you do that?” They usually have no idea.
- Help them be a “feelings detective”. Help the student to work back from the behavior to the feeling that triggered it.
- Instead of giving students time outs, considering giving them time ins. What we often call attention seeking behavior is really connection seeking behavior.



FIND SUPPORT FOR YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS

As teachers and school staff, it is important to recognize when there is a need for additional support and intervention for both ourselves and our students. We have included several resources below that are tailored to the needs of students and school staff members. Imagine University also offers a number of virtual training opportunities for teachers, administrators and students.



- Visit imaginenj.org for more information or speak with one of our clinicians at (908) 264-3100
- Locate support groups for grieving children at: <https://childrengrieve.org/find-support>
- For more information about how to support grieving students go to The Coalition for Grieving Students website: <https://grievingstudents.org/>
- For adults in need of mental health support: SAMHSA’s National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357) and TTY 1-800-487-4889
- For children/teens in NJ who need additional support: 2nd floor youth hotline: 888-222-2228 anytime or text them at 888-222-2228.
- Sample back to school talking points <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/covid-19-pandemic-resources/>

