

A photograph of children in traditional Day of the Dead costumes. One child in the foreground has white face paint with black skeletal patterns and a red flower in their hair. Another child to the right wears a yellow shirt with a pink heart and a mask with a mustache. The background shows other children in similar costumes, some with large colorful feathered headdresses.

The Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos)

An opportunity to start a conversation about death

Festivals, parades, and group celebrations, held on November 1-2 during All Souls' Day and All Saints' Day, are used in some cultures as a way to remember and honor friends and family members who have died. Families may visit cemeteries and build private altars where pictures and memorabilia of the deceased, along with their favorite foods and beverages, are offered to encourage visits by the souls of their loved ones. Through these rituals those who are alive demonstrate their love and respect for those who have died. The Day of the Dead is a lively and joyful celebration with a goal of sustaining the memory and spirit of those that have passed onto another phase after their life on earth.

The 2017 Disney film “Coco” follows a 12-year-old Mexican boy and shows the continuing bond between the living and deceased ancestors. Miguel, who dreams of being a musician, is accidentally transported to the Land of the Dead, where he is helped by his deceased great-great-grandfather to return him to family among the living and honor the true legacy of his deceased family member. Day of the Dead celebrations, common throughout Latin America, appear in other media and are becoming more popular in the United States. As such, children unfamiliar with this cultural tradition may have questions about the holiday. Conversations about the Day of the Dead can be an opportunity to start important conversations about what it means, and how it feels, when someone you care about has died.

For those children grieving the death of someone close to them, celebrations that remind them that loved ones can still exist in our memories and in our hearts can bring some comfort. But it may also be confusing to children who are unfamiliar with the tradition. And it may serve as a grief trigger, reminding grieving children of not only their continuing connection to those who have died, but also their persistent longing to be reunited and sorrow about the loss.

Checking In: What to Say

Many children may embrace the rich cultural traditions of the Day of the Dead as a way they can maintain their family legacy and their continuing bond with their deceased loved one. Grieftriggers, sudden reminders of the person who died that cause powerful emotional responses, can be unsettling for other grieving students. Often, by anticipating triggers, education professionals can help minimize their effect. For example, an educator might ask a student directly whether Day of the Dead celebrations, or events related to Halloween that occur just prior, are part of their family traditions or if they have been troubling. “The Day of the Dead and Halloween celebrations can bring a lot of focus to death. I wonder if it’s bothering you, or if you have any thoughts about it.” An educational professional might also take a more general approach with a non-specific check-in. “I’ve been thinking about you lately, and wondering how things are going. It’s been a few months since your sister died. I imagine you think about her a lot.”

If a classroom activity is going to specifically address the Day of the Dead or Halloween, teachers can talk with a grieving student ahead of time, describe the activity, see if it sounds okay, and offer an alternative if needed. It’s also a good idea to introduce such activities in the classroom with sensitivity. Teachers can’t know everything that has happened in the lives of their students and what family traditions are followed. Offering options to all students, even when you are unaware that any student in your class may be grieving, can allow students to choose activities that help them minimize potential triggers.

Learn more about children’s experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students (GrievingStudents.org). The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement is a Lead Founding Member of the Coalition.