

Halloween and Grieving Students: A Check-in Can Help

It's Halloween, a holiday based on religious beliefs and cultural traditions that has become a much-celebrated part of our American popular culture. Children and teens of all ages enjoy wearing a variety of costumes, being out at night, "trick or treating," participating in pranks, and toying with frightful themes including death.

Is this focus on death a concern for grieving students? It can be.



HALLOWEEN AS A GRIEF TRIGGER

Halloween themes can be provocative at times. Children and teens often pick costumes that will give them attention, cause reactions from their peers and adults, and help them assume the identity of a hero (e.g., Superman). Many choose costumes that confront their fears of death.

Sometimes costumes or decorations reflect actual elements of the death a student is grieving—an injury, illness, or shooting for example. More often, the general focus on death, darkness, and fear may be enough to serve as a grief trigger for some students. Some may be troubled at the lightheartedness and humor being brought to the topic of death.

CHECKING IN: WHAT TO SAY

Triggers, sudden reminders of the person who died that cause powerful emotional responses, can be unsettling for grieving students. Often, by anticipating triggers, education professionals can help minimize their effect.

For example, an educator might ask a student directly whether Halloween celebrations have been troubling. "I know these things are not like what happened when your dad died last summer,

but Halloween does 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 Halloween, teachers can talk with a grieving student ahead of time, describe the activity, see if it sounds okay, and offer an alternative if it doesn't.

It's also a good idea to introduce activities in the classroom with sensitivity and provide some different options. Students can be asked to wear costumes of their favorite hero rather than a costume which depicts "spooky" characters. Teachers can't know everything that has happened in the lives of their students. 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 avoid 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 NCSCB is a Lead Founding Member of the Coalition.