

Supporting your Child or Teen through Grief and Loss

Ms. Dessureault, a teacher at Father Mercredi School, has been recently diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. Here are a couple of things to consider in helping your child understand and deal with questions regarding cancer and the grief they feel about their teacher being ill.

Talk about it. Bring up Ms. Dessureault's illness. Ask how your child is feeling. Ask about what they remember and think about her. Talk about your own feelings and how you felt when someone you knew was ill (or how you feel about Ms. Dessureault's illness). Don't avoid the topic and don't be hesitant to talk about Ms. Dessureault.

Educate them about grief. Let your child know what is normal when it comes to grief and sadness. While there aren't universal reactions to the loss or illness of someone close, there are some common reactions people can have: shock and disbelief, sadness, anger, anxiety, confusion and, sometimes, guilt. Many people cycle through these feelings. Sometimes it can seem like they are resolved and then back they come. Make sure your child knows about these reactions. Validate whatever feelings they experience. Boys especially may need permission to express their sadness by crying. It is also important to let them know that everyone grieves in their own way. They don't have to do it like everyone else. The important thing is for them to let you know how they are feeling.

Support the Dessureault Family. Take a moment to pray for her and her family. If your child had a limited connection to her, then a prayer or a moment of wishing her family and friends well in this difficult time can be enough. If your child knows her well then a more formal gesture might be in order: sending her an email supporting her in her journey would make her day.

Comforting friends. Some of your child's friends may have known Ms. Dessureault better than others. Help your child know how to support an upset friend. Make sure they tell you if it seems like their friend is especially upset. Wondering what they should do, if they are doing enough and if something is wrong can be stressful on your child. Your child will need to know that just being with someone while they are sad can be enough.

Emotional ripples. Make sure your child knows that it's ok if they are not deeply affected by Ms. Dessureault's illness. It is sad when a nice person with a nice family becomes sick. But your child may worry they aren't sad enough even though they weren't particularly close to Ms. Dessureault. When it comes to grief, you feel what you feel. But it is important to respect other peoples' grief.

What's next? Help your child think through what's next; for Ms. Dessureault, for Ms. Dessureault's family and friends, and for Ms. Dessureault's students. This is one of the crucial times when faith traditions provide comfort. You are setting the stage for your child to handle significant stressors they will face in their lives. Give them a model for imagining what may occur for someone who is very ill.

What if? When someone they know dies or becomes ill, children can also begin to wonder what would happen if you died. If that comes up, take it seriously. Make sure they know who would care for them if something happened to you.

Stay close. The illness of someone you know leads to a realization of how important our loved ones are to us. Hug your child. Keep close to them for a couple of days. Check in with them more often than you might otherwise.