EXTENSION

Grief Specialist Joins HES Extension

Dr. Tashel Bordere Makes Grief Training in Schools a Priority

“I plan to see Missouri lead the nation one school at a time in grief support,” says new Human Environmental Sciences Extension state specialist Tashel Bordere. Bordere plans to springboard that goal with grief training in Columbia’s 27 schools this year. She wants to train school employees before a crisis hits. “Death is unpredictable,” she says. “and people tend to underestimate its impact on children.”

Bordere’s work helps children and families everywhere, says HES Extension associate dean Jo Britt-Rankin. “Each day children experience loss and grief. We need to prepare them, their families and those who work with them on a daily basis to understand the grieving process, how to recognize the signs of grief, and how to express their feelings,” Britt-Rankin says.

Like adults, children experience death in many ways. Few resources exist to help. “We all get a birth certificate and a death certificate, but we don’t get grief education in between,” Bordere says. Little is worse for children than when a fellow student dies. Lee Expressive Arts Elementary School students in Columbia, Mo. returned from holiday break in 2014 to learn that a classmate had died. The school was the first in the state to have 100 percent of its employees trained in grief counseling. Bordere trained them just weeks before the student’s death.

MU Extension’s SHED (Surviving, Healing, Evolving through Death) Grief Education and Support Program provides grief support kits. The kits, implemented by Bordere, provide educational materials, memorial activities and opportunities for discussion. The school’s PTA also put a plan in place to memorialize the death.

“Children experience grief as intensely as adults, but they often express it differently,” Bordere says.

A death often triggers memories of a past loss of a pet or loved one. Less obvious signs – nightmares, regressive behavior, changes in sleep habits, inability to focus, and behavior changes – run deeper than tears and crying. Signs of grief might be immediate or delayed. “Everybody has their own timeline,” Bordere says. Grief’s impact varies based upon factors such as relationship to the deceased, experiences with death and loss, developmental stage, available support, and recency of loss.

Bordere covers cultural variations in coping with loss, including the impact of cumulative losses in low-income areas.

Bordere gives school employees tools to understand the grief process so they can identify it and help students. Often, adults try to protect children from the pain of death, Bordere says. Communicating about the death validates their loss and reassures children that their basic needs for security and routines will be met. Don’t minimize losses, she says. The impact is greater when children are uninformed, misinformed or are told after grief rituals for saying goodbye such as a funeral have already occurred.

Adults may say a person or pet is “lost, sleeping or gone away.” These words can be interpreted literally by children and cause fear and confusion. “It’s OK to say ‘death’ and ‘died,’” Bordere says. “Children know the word ‘death.'” There is no misinterpretation to derive from the word death,” Bordere says. “Death means one thing.”

Bordere’s primary research area is grief and coping following homicide loss. Friends and families of victims and perpetrators often know one another. They may live, work or go to school in close proximity.

The legal process often prolongs grieving. Trials and media coverage may compound raw emotions and create a sense of revictimization. Victims, as well as perpetrators, of homicides may face harsh public scrutiny. Acquaintances may struggle with what to say or when and how to support survivors.

“Acknowledging loss is always important regardless of the mode of death, but this is especially so in stigmatized losses. Survivors are more likely to be disenfranchised grievers, coping in isolation without support. In essence, what you have is a bereaved person. The cause is irrelevant,” Bordere says. “There will be a new normal forever.”

Bordere earned her bachelor’s degree in psychology and english from Xavier University at New Orleans. She received her master’s and doctorate degrees in Human Development and Family Studies from MU. She is certified in thanatology (death, dying and bereavement) from the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC). She is editor of ADEC Forum, a publication of the Association for Death Education and Counseling.

“Dr. Bordere is a leading expert in this area and I am so happy to have her working with us in Missouri. I see her work being adopted nationally in the coming years,” Britt-Rankin says.