

On Educating Girls: The Connected Girl Episode 4

Title: Handling Heartbreak, with Angela Terpstra

[00:00:00] **Trudy Hall:** Tweets, soundbites, texts, emojis. In our modern world, that's how we connect. But in a world where we are supposedly more connected than ever, why are so many young people and girls in particular feeling more disconnected from themselves? At the International Coalition of Girls Schools, we're invested in ensuring that girls are whole, healthy, and well. We believe keeping them connected to their voices and their confidence is the key to keeping them so.

[00:00:36] **Voice Notes:** Like a gentle wind chime, my voice knows music happens. When connection begins. My voice, my voice, my voice synthesizes with my friends and teachers. Allows other voices to complement mine. Harmonizing and mixing as one. My voice leaps across the hallway to say hello to my classmate who's having a bad day. Our voices speak of powerful magic. Tell a story that will unfold long into the future. Together. Together. Together. Together. We make history every day. Together. We are instruments of change.

[00:01:07] **Trudy Hall:** Connection often begins with an invitation, the Connected Girl. A podcast series curated by the International Coalition of Girls Schools is an invitation to those who know, love and believe in empowering girls to engage with the experts we have gathered to understand the power and possibility of the many connections in the lives of girls.

[00:01:37] **Student voice note:** I'd say with grief, for me personally, the main thing is letting myself feel it and not trying to pretend like it hasn't happened or pretend like it's not going on. Rather than hiding it, I give myself the time to deal with it. But if that just means literally just like lying on my bed and crying for a couple of days or talking to people around me but giving myself the time to acknowledge what's actually happened and what's going on. Because I feel like you really need to, I think this goes back to knowing yourself and just knowing, giving yourself the opportunity to actually feel things. Because once you can feel it, you can actually combat it and like overcome it. But if you pretend like it hasn't happened, it's always just lingering there a little bit until it's going to just hit you on time.

[00:02:24] **Student voice note:** I think I've seen, I've seen people who have dealt with it in that way and just like ignoring it and I see them, not see them suffer because obviously there are different kinds of suffering but, I've seen like a sort of a taboo and this like taboo subject I don't think is a healthy coping mechanism and I think de-stigmatizing things or really sad and really difficult topics such as grief is really important because it's so much harder, like, easier said than done. But I think it's so important, what Alina says, to really just let yourself feel it, because sad emotions are important in growth, in life. And I think, the way I deal with things now, obviously, like, learning from when I was a teenager and things like that, it just important to really talk to yourself. Like, I'd also recommend counselling. Like, in schools now, there are

a lot of counsellors you can get for free. Counselling here is really good and, like, I think that's really important for some people who are ready to talk about it. But if not, speak to yours, as we've spoken about before, connections and relations. And speak to people who you trust in order to be able to get through it.

[00:03:32] **Trudy Hall:** In a world in which healthy connections play an important role in keeping girls whole and grounded, how do we even begin to talk about the unthinkable? The loss of a relationship that sustains a girl through thick and thin, yet loss, a breakup with a first true love, a move away from friends, the loss of an adored pet, a parent's divorce, The loss of a safe relationship, or, or worse, the death of a loved one, will, sad to say, play a role in the life of every girl. As Helen Keller, a renowned disability advocate of the 20th century, once noted, we bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world, the company of those who have known suffering. What we know for sure is that the girls in our lives will grieve a loss in their family, in their school or church community, in their world. In a series about connections, it is essential that we talk about a girl's connection to her grief and how best to support her as she walks with grief, even as we help her shape and reframe the many and varied emotions that will flow from that loss. Yes, every type of grief is different and every one of us grieves differently. There's no grief handbook, but that's not a reason to dodge this important conversation. Hello, I'm Trudy Hall, your host for the fourth of six episodes in our Connected Girls series, which focuses on the critical connections in girls lives. There's no best way to start the conversation we're going to have today, as any way in is a hard way. We're talking about loss, something that makes the girls in our lives feel profoundly sad and heartbroken. Walking the path of sorrow and sadness with them can break our hearts too. I hope we all know that it is in times of deepest loss that we lean heaviest into the communities that know and support us. For many girls, this will be their school community. So for that reason, I've invited Angela Terpstra, the head of school at Bishop Strawn School in Toronto, Canada, to join me today. School leaders often become grief counselors, spiritual leaders, pillars of strength to whom others turn. When times are unimaginably hard. Yes, we might have asked a professional psychologist to unpack this conversation, but our girls live in community. And ultimately, it'll be the reconnections to that community which may lighten the heaviness and rekindle joy through some days that are bound to be dark for her. Angela led her own school community through a period of significant loss. Three separate students lost their lives over the course of four months. And she grew very wise about the grieving process of young people as those months and moments unfolded. Welcome, Angela. I am delighted that you could be here to help us unpack this really complicated terrain.

[00:06:34] **Angela Terpstra:** Thank you, Trudy. It's really a pleasure to come and talk and share my experience with others.

[00:06:38] **Trudy Hall:** When we first connected to talk about your story of leading a school through a period of deep loss, I asked you where we should start the conversation. And interestingly, you said, at the end, you mentioned what you now know about the role that schools play when there's a loss of a community member.

So let's start our conversation there. What role do schools play in these hard moments for girls?

[00:07:04] **Angela Terpstra:** Yes, and at the end is the really important place to start because that's where I had reflection and, and time to actually think through what actually happened during this period of months whenever we lost three young alum.

And my reflection took me to a theoretical framework, um, that helped me understand what was going on in this particular situation. And the theoretical framework comes from Robert Putt who chronicled large sociological changes in American and contemporary Western life. Putnam surveyed in detail how Americans changing behavior over the decades showed how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures. And whether it could be the PTA, your synagogue, your church, mosque, clubs, political parties, and, interestingly, because the title of his book is molding alone. Now the book's really about social capital and the role it plays in our lives. But the interesting part for me was charting the decline of these institutions in our lives. Because it really helped me come to understand that our schools have come to be the center of our students lives and our families lives. And the more we have parents, grandparents, great grandparents who all have a connection to our school, the more that we truly are the center of their lives. And I think that the, as institutions, we all have rituals and habits that we, we say are a part of our community and they are important markers in the life of our community and become important markers as we actually think about how do we deal with grief and loss in our communities as well.

[00:08:46] **Trudy Hall:** During that time, when we first connected, you said something else. That was quite provocative for me and I think it's related to what you just said you noted that we are schools of hope And I think that's where you might want to go next. What did you learn about that?

[00:09:03] **Angela Terpstra:** I think we are schools of hope because when loss happens We turn to family and friends and we have built networks of girls and women who are ambitious but kind they're entrepreneurial, yet they're freely giving of themselves and in a world where there is this disconnectedness, sadness, loneliness, we are strong images of hope that push against these things happening in contemporary culture. We celebrate communities that are social and supportive. And our rituals are often about uniting each other together and the rituals of ties that bind us. And so when people are at their least happy, perhaps they're suffering, then they turn to us now. And that's why we are schools of hope. We provide the hope that they need.

[00:09:53] **Trudy Hall:** I do like thinking about schools as places where our families and our students, their friends can find hope. And I want to build on that one as we talk about defining more of our terms for today. We talk about loss, we talk about grief, and we often put them in the same sentence, loss and grief. But they're different. How would you describe the difference?

[00:10:20] **Angela Terpstra:** Yes, I think loss is exactly that. It's the event of losing something or someone, and it triggers an emotional reaction, anger, fear, being emotionally overcome. And grief is the reaction to those losses. It's individual and it's unique to each situation. In the loss of a child, it is a set of catastrophic feelings. Not just emotional, but physical, cognitive, losing perspective, wisdom, all of those things. And it, it's so unique and different to each one. So, what I have experienced is actually seeing families react entirely differently. So some hold it together until after the public phase of that grief, and then they really, really fall in on each other. And it's a really tough time. I have seen others where their grief was unspeakable from the beginning of it all. And so I think that loss, understanding that loss and grief is really important. I, I think that that's also important to help our families understand when we are interacting with them and helping them, that we need to identify the loss and then the grief becomes the reaction to it as well.

[00:11:29] **Trudy Hall:** So thanks for parsing that for us. As these emotions then flow from loss and grief, what strikes you about managing the range of emotions? There are so many, you just mentioned every family goes through them differently. Every child goes through them differently and there's a full range. How can we dive in to manage that?

[00:11:52] **Angela Terpstra:** So I think that this is, uh, this is a really, really important point because it comes from actually knowing your families and you understand what is unusual about this reaction and what is not unusual. In some, some cases, you know, that because of how they live their emotions, perhaps more publicly, it's going to come that way. I, I think the one that was most of us surprised to me, and yet I could understand was the emotion of anger. And at first, I was a bit taken aback by the forcefulness of the anger. And the anger was directed at the school. But as I began to compartmentalize it, I realized that all of these emotions are unpredictable. And the challenging part of grief is the timing of it all. But I think the anger was not at me. This was absolutely, and not at the school, but it was absolutely their way dealing with this loss. And it was strong and it was okay because I could set it aside and say, yes, this is coming to me, but it's really not about me. And I think it was really important to be able to stand back and realize that this is, this is okay.

[00:13:05] **Trudy Hall:** So it was important for you to stand back and realize it was okay. And that prompts me to ask, how did you take care of yourself through this? I think anybody managing the process is having their own experience, even as they're helping another, and in your case, an entire community. How did you take care of yourself?

[00:13:25] **Angela Terpstra:** Yeah, I think that's interesting. Um, fortunately, I have a partner who is really, really helpful and several people on our senior leadership team were very, very helpful to me as it went forward. Sometimes a case of anger is really interesting because I felt that that is not something I wanted to share with everyone because I didn't want the picture of this family to change in other people's eyes. So this is something that as a head you absorb and you take. But fortunately, if you've got somebody in your life who you can share things with and you can talk it through,

that was the most important thing. And actually, in all of these cases, it was really, really, really important.

[00:14:07] **Trudy Hall:** As we think, then, about all these emotions, let's stay on that topic for a moment. Surely, in all of this, there are some gentle moments of joy. At least that has been my experience as I've worked through the process of grief with folks I love. Did that surface at all in your school community or your work with these families?

[00:14:28] **Angela Terpstra:** The hard part about when we were dealing with these particular things, the context was COVID and that was really important because we were not able to assemble, we were not able to do some of those things that we would normally do and so COVID was changing everything. And that actually forced us to think about the rituals that we would bring in that were different than what we might normally do. And so a common ritual that I think is actually a really important one is that we're fortunate enough to have a beautiful chapel that seats about 300 people. And while, many of our students are absolutely religiously diverse and, um, and perhaps do not have any faith at all. That chapel is a place of gathering. So even though they have no faith, they feel very comfortable gathering there. In COVID, we couldn't gather there. We couldn't put out the candles that we would normally put out. We couldn't, um, have a place to put a book and people sign the book and come in and sit quietly. So that was all taken away. So we had to think differently about how we had some rituals. And unfortunately, the only way we could do it was through Zoom. And in one case, it was really challenging because we couldn't assemble at all, even for the funeral. So the funeral was all on Zoom, but it was very, very carefully curated, so that, um, all those things went away. So that's where we turn to, what do people need now? They need to read stories of this, these students. And so we encouraged faculty and other alum to write. And we gathered those stories into a book. And that became a really important thing for families to receive, which was actually a really nice moment of joy, because in the book, there were funny stories, there were silly things. And I remember when we went on this particular trip, and overnight trip and this funny thing happened and that was actually lovely for parents and family members to read because it brought back that particular student in, in all her wonderful lived glory. So it was really beautiful.

[00:16:38] **Girl 1:** If you really want to help a friend through it, before you even talk about it, you should sit them down and be like, like, what would you like me to do for you? Like, would you like solutions? Would you like just like, like talking to a brick wall? Would you just like someone to talk to? Would you like, uh me to get someone else for you? Would you like to get someone involved? Like I think there are a number of different ways you can help your friends and if you're really close to them I think you probably know what, what to do and how to deal with it. But it's always good to make like make sure you get clarification I think.

[00:17:10] **Girl 2:** Especially at our age at seventeen, you're not expected to be this like savior angel like your words are not going to reverse what's happened and if you don't feel in a position where you can give a, a mature response or a response that

you think is going to be right. It's okay to just not respond at all, because sometimes that's the right thing to do.

[00:17:31] **Trudy Hall:** You mentioned ritual. You also mentioned that your school community is a very diverse school community. Because ritual is important in such moments and symbolic and special programs are important, how did you negotiate the terrain from that standpoint? You've just explained how you did it from the standpoint of not being able to gather. How do you figure out how to do it and meet the needs of each different family?

[00:17:56] **Angela Terpstra:** That is tricky because you have to know your family and you have to be in conversation with the families as well. The sad thing about it was that several of the families wanted to come to the school and during COVID we had to say, no, you can't because we couldn't break the health restrictions that we were living with. That's where we had to be really, really creative as it was and get students to write out. We actually, in one case, we were suggesting that students, um, drop off some things at, at the, at the front step of the house so that there was some tangible things that the family could see and these were stories, flowers, food, uh, we, we welcomed all of it. I think that it's interesting because the whole experience and COVID itself really led me to think about how important ritual is in our schools. I mean, we were, all of us were dealing with the obvious loss of you know, graduation ceremonies, um, and all the other things that mark the different turning points in our school's lives. And I think that ritual is a, as someone said, it's an ancient social technology that works its magic in communities. Um, when it's taken away, it is, uh, it, you have this terrible period of loneliness. And so that's something that I really worried about a lot for this family, because to suffer grief of a very young person who had passed away and feel loneliness was the worst that I could imagine. And in each case, we were looking for ways in which. This particular family would be able to feel connected to the community to the other alum. And, um, and so the interesting thing is that the rituals have continued because for one student in particular, we were able to, ah, dedicate a tree and what we ended up doing, the students couldn't come. So the tree was dedicated and it was a terribly cold, late, late November time, the wind was blowing and it was the worst time. So then, what we did was when after COVID happened, we sent out an invitation to all the grads in that particular year and invited them back and the parents came and we dedicated the tree in actually what would have been a more, a bigger ceremony than we would normally have. The occasion called for it. And the really heart-warming thing was that over half of the students in that particular class showed up for the ceremony. And it was a really beautiful, and the parents were extremely touched by it.

[00:20:28] **Trudy Hall:** The interesting thing about the word ritual, as you are using it, and as I think about it is, that can apply to families, too, because families have their own rituals, and the notion of thinking about how to encourage a family, or the girls we love, uh, to explore some of the rituals that have always been in their lives that are associated with this position. They don't always have to be celebrated precisely the same way, maybe they're celebrated differently, but to hang on to that word I think is a good caution, so thanks for sharing that.

[00:20:56] **Angela Terpstra:** And, and I do think that we all work in schools where, and especially girl schools, where sometimes tradition is a word that if you, if something happens twice, it becomes a tradition. And that's not necessarily always a good thing for actually developing a ritual. And how does the ritual match with the values of your school? That is a really important thing.

[00:21:20] **Trudy Hall:** Excellent distinction. And you're so right. We've just been talking about how a community can use ritual, which is excellent. I loved it. Um, now I want to go specifically to person to person. So what's your advice for someone who wants to do something that might be meaningful for the person or family? Just gestures that you have seen be helpful to perhaps both the person who needs to support and the person who needs support.

[00:21:46] **Angela Terpstra:** So interestingly, one of the things that came out of this recent experience is that we realized we actually didn't have a memorial policy. And we realized that we needed that, um, because sometimes people are asking us to do things that we don't do. I'll give you an example. Because we have this big, beautiful space, people, and it's a religious space, it is an Anglican chapel, but we don't do funerals in the chapel. And so I think it's really important to think through before you're in this situation, and we weren't, so we were on the back foot a bit with all of this. Um, but we do now have a really helpful memorial policy that deals with generally what we, what we can do and what we can't do as well. And, and sometimes this will come into, well, people want to raise money in order to memorialize a particular student. It could even be a faculty member as well. And we need to have really clear policies on what that would look like, how much money actually goes into a scholarship, how much, all of those kinds of things.

[00:22:54] **Trudy Hall:** I like the notion, and I think it's probably hard, but I like the notion of thinking in advance about what one might do. It's important for us individually. Um, I know these are hard questions to think about, but I think I would offer those listening to spend a bit of time being reflective about what might be important in such moments. And speaking of that, you clearly have, um, reflected a lot. Um, this and, and, and, and on the episode for you personally, uh, for the girls in your school, for the parents, what surprised you as you were traveling through this challenging chapter? What do you wish you had known perhaps before you had to lead the entire community through this?

[00:23:41] **Angela Terpstra:** Well I think that the first obvious surprise is that this whole idea of we have become the community hub for our families lives. We are. And when tragedy strikes, they will turn to us. Even if, in some cases, even if a funeral is off site, we will be asked to be involved. And I think the second thing that I have learned through this is how much time it all takes. So you have to stop what you're doing. You have to attend to the grieving families, your alum, or your current students. It is hard work, it's really emotional, but you need to do it because this is when the values of your school come into full light, they're just there. And, and don't try to add this to the work of another busy day. This this you'll have to clean out your calendar and focus just on this because people are watching you as well.

[00:24:37] **Trudy Hall:** It's interesting that you mentioned, um, how others ah, two things really for me. One is how important it is to be present and to let distractions slip away um, and the difference that can make in the process for both yourself and, uh, for those who are going through the process. But then you just mentioned something I wanted to think about for a moment with you. And that is the reaction that others are having who are not necessarily in the family, not necessarily, perhaps even know the family well. But I think these moments. Oftentimes open up, uh, potentially, uh, a former memory of former sense of loss. And did you find that to be the reality as well?

[00:25:21] **Angela Terpstra:** I did. I did. And I think that I found that this really made me understand that depth of the community itself. Um, and I found that it was really challenging for me to sometimes reach out. I, I remember being on phone calls with alum afterwards and asking, what is it you need? And part of me was wondering, how much becomes our responsibility and how much actually is because they're now adults and yet I kept coming back to they're calling me, they are calling the school. We have to be there for them We can't take on the role of being a grief counsellor, but we absolutely need to take on the role of being there for them. And that's a fine line That's a really fine line.

[00:26:07] **Trudy Hall:** And, You're right. And so shifting our thoughts away from perhaps the loss of life to the many other losses that girls experience, given what you've just said about that fine line about what's your responsibility and what they need to move through on their own, is there something you now know or do, uh, to counsel others to do for girls or who are in the midst of coming to terms with a loss of some sort?

[00:26:36] **Angela Terpstra:** Yes. Ah, well, I have thought a lot about this, as you can imagine, and one of the things that I did observe and I should also add that, um, in my career, as an assistant head, I encountered two other losses as well, so, of students. They were actually students at the school. And so, I've had five, um, losses in my career, which is, um

[00:27:00] **Trudy Hall:** Too many.

[00:27:01] **Angela Terpstra:** Perhaps normal, perhaps not.

[00:27:03] **Trudy Hall:** Too many.

[00:27:04] **Angela Terpstra:** Um, but I think one of the things that I find that's really important is that as the adults in the building, um, we also have to help girls find the balance between indulging their emotions in an unrestrained way and being aware that they need to grieve. This is a really hard thing with girls. Really, really hard. The circle of care must be present and available, but we also sometimes have to redirect their grief so that it isn't over indexing on their emotions as well. And also, if a child seems overly emotioned in her reaction, you might not know everything, and so the

parents need to be alerted and perhaps called in. And, and pulled into the conversation because there could be other things there as well that really need to be addressed. Um, so I think that's, to me, it's that balance between girls indulging in their emotions. And finding when, when is it time to send them back to class? When is it time? And that's also really important when you have a space in your, in your, as I mentioned earlier, um, for other things. We've also had spaces in our chapel where they come in and light candles. But there also is, the adult needs to be hovering, not intruding, but then watching who's there and who isn't there and who might need extra help and who doesn't and when it's time to shoo them back to class.

[00:28:31] **Trudy Hall:** Well said. And that goes back to something you've said now a couple of times in this podcast, which is know your families, know your girls, know your people, uh, and, and know when something feels out of sync. Are there specific resources that you found helpful?

[00:28:46] **Angela Terpstra:** One of the best places I've seen is the Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education, CSEE. They have very good. resources that are reasonable and, um, and, and work with our schools very, very well. They understand our schools. But I would think, frankly, the best resources are in our own community, and it's important to tap them. Your counselors are the best ones who know our kids. Um, if you're lucky enough to have a chaplain, that person is also a great resource. But also, here's a really interesting thing that happened. Um, when other heads are going through this, reach out to them. And I will never forget that when I had to announce to a faculty that we had a student collapse and pass away on a gym floor one morning. And then I had to tell the staff that the child had passed away. And unbeknownst to me, a local, another head from a boys school, um, didn't, I didn't even know he was coming. He showed up, he came in as I was about to address the staff, and he stood beside me. I will never, never forget that. I had never done this before, uh, but it was such an amazing spiritual, spiritual, um, and, uh, emotional support for me. So, I think if that's not possible, then absolutely, e-mail, write, call and say, I know you're going through this, I think it's, but it will eventually all fall back on us as heads. And I think as heads, it is so important for us to be there for each other.

[00:30:32] **Trudy Hall:** Angela, what I so appreciate about this conversation is that you've given us a language, a language that I keyed in on, as you mentioned, it was the circle of care. And I like thinking about the fact that the circle of care needs to look different for every person, yet, um, it must include ritual that's important to that person, and critically, it needs to incorporate the notion and the sense and the reality of community. And we can lean into community as we create that circle of care that's so appropriate for that one individual who's experiencing this. I thank you so much for this conversation. It has been thoughtful and it has helped me reflect.

[00:31:12] **Angela Terpstra:** Thank you, Trudy. It's been also helpful for me to reflect on it again. And if I can be of any help to any of our heads as they go through this, please reach out.

[00:31:21] **Student voice note:** Sometimes, especially when you're in grief, you think it's like, the end of the world like it's yeah, everything's just happened to you in that one moment So it's really good not to have like a reality check but just to know that like it's not just the be all and end all like life is still life. Yeah. I think it's still worth living

[00:31:40] **Student voice note:** It's important to recognize that grief isn't like a normal body response and that especially when you're in your teenage years, it's something that you will probably have never experienced before. And it's important to realize that, um, it's okay to feel emotions.

[00:31:59] **Trudy Hall:** You've been listening to the fourth episode of the Connected Girl, a specially curated series produced by the International Coalition of Girl Schools. for it's On Educating Girls podcast. This episode is the fourth of sixth podcast engaging listeners to think about the many ways that the connections in girls lives keep them whole and healthy. The International Coalition of Girls Schools created this series in true partnership with Two Stories. Audio editing, engineering, and sound design were done by Kozi Mzimela and Jordyn Toohey. Thanks to the girls of Wickham High School in Wickham, England and Culver Girls Academy in Culver, Indiana For the audio clips of girls voices used in the Connected Girls series, the story of the poem, Tell Our Story, used in the intro, can be found on the ICGS website. For more information, please refer to the show notes. Thanks for listening. It's important to the girls in your lives that you do.