



Supporting Children and Family Survivors of Police Line-of-Duty Deaths

Police Survivors: Line-of-Duty Deaths

Children who experience the loss of a parent or other family member through a line-of-duty death are likely to face a number of unique issues. School professionals working with students in such circumstances will be able to provide more effective support when they understand the distinct aspects of this experience.

The materials in this module are designed as a supplement to the broader information at the Coalition's website. They are not intended to be a stand-alone resource.

They were developed collaboratively with the national non-profit organization [Concerns of Police Survivors \(C.O.P.S.\)](#).

C.O.P.S. provides support for families who have experienced a line-of-duty death. Over 30,000 families are members of the organization.

Are Your Students Affected?

Each year, more than a hundred law enforcement officers in the U.S. are killed in the line of duty. Their children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews and younger siblings attend schools all across the country. Each of these deaths touches the families of other law enforcement officers. Educators can expect to find children affected by line-of-duty deaths in schools throughout the nation.



Line-of-Duty Deaths: Three Essential Points About Children and Family Survivors

1. Most grief experiences are similar. In most ways, children and family survivors of line-of-duty deaths experience grief and coping with loss much as others do. They have similar thoughts, feelings, concerns and needs.
2. Some grief experiences are distinct in important ways. Survivors of line-of-duty deaths are coping with unique issues within a unique culture. Most people outside the law enforcement world are unfamiliar with these issues.
3. School professionals can make a difference. When school professionals are aware of the distinct issues facing these families, they can plan and provide more effective support.

Take Steps to Make a Difference

To understand more about providing support to survivors of a line-of-duty death, read through the materials in this module. Each segment includes references to the Coalition to Support Grieving Students website.

Together, these materials will prepare school professionals to offer meaningful support to children immediately after a death as well as over time.

Contents of the Module

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2. Distinct Experiences: In the Immediate Aftermath
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6. What to Do: Action steps schools and school professionals can take to support children coping with the loss of a loved one through a line-of-duty death.



Supporting Children and Family Survivors of Police Line-of-Duty Deaths

1. Law Enforcement: A Unique Culture and Mindset

- See the module [Cultural Sensitivity](#) to understand how a general sensitivity to the unique backgrounds and needs of each family can help school professionals support grieving children from all cultures.
- See the module [Connecting With Families](#) for suggestions about how to effectively reach out to grieving families.

Within the law enforcement field, there is a unique mindset among police officers and their families. There is no other profession serving quite the same role or facing the same risks that police personnel face every day. People outside the law enforcement world often have little understanding of the experiences of officers and their families.

This is a resilient culture, with many strengths and assets. Law enforcement families typically value loyalty, commitment, dedication and principles of service. They are willing to take on extra responsibilities and risks for the welfare of their neighborhoods and communities. They believe in the value of police work and the power of law enforcement to make a positive difference in the world.

Parents, spouses and children of officers understand their family member is at risk for injury or death. Living with this knowledge on a day-to-day basis requires some effort. Many practice a type of healthy denial that helps them cope. “Nothing will happen to my mom because we live in a safe place.” “My dad is smarter than the bad guys so I know he’ll be okay.”

Like other families, law enforcement families generally make assumptions that allow them to feel safe. We presume that the people we love who are in our lives in the morning will also be there for us in the evening. We assume that our friends and the social groups where we find comfort and support today will also offer us comfort tomorrow.

Death Challenges These Presumptions

When a line-of-duty death occurs, these presumptions can be profoundly challenged. There are a range of responses children and families might have.

For example:

- The world becomes more dangerous. Because the possibility of death is a fear the family has been coping with all along, the ability to go forward and use healthy denial or make presumptions about a stable world may be disrupted. Many things about the world that once felt safe and secure are now likely to feel dangerous or threatening.
- Children regret not being “better.” Children may regret not staying more connected with their parent or loved one. They often feel they should have been “a better kid,” more attentive or more available. They may think, “I should have known this would happen. I should have spent more time with my dad, and not gotten into trouble so much.”
- Families may feel relieved. In addition to shock and grief, some family members may actually feel a sense of relief when the constant worry about their loved one ends, just as people sometimes do when someone dies after a long illness. This can bring up feelings of guilt and shame.
- Children may feel resentful. Children understand their loved one made a commitment to serve and protect the community. They may be resentful that because of that choice, the person is now dead. They may feel guilty about wishing he or she had not chosen to serve.
- Questions of honor can be confusing. There are many causes of line-of-duty deaths, including deaths from accidents or natural causes that may occur while the officer is on duty which may not seem as “heroic.” Children may sense they should feel proud of their loved one under any circumstances, but may hear or feel conflicting responses to the cause of death.

The unique culture of law enforcement also plays an important role in the responses of family members to a line-of-duty death immediately after the fact and over time.



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2. Distinct Experiences: In the Immediate Aftermath

- See the module [Concepts of Death](#) to learn what children need to understand about death and how to discuss these matters with them.
- See the module [Social Media](#) for suggestions about dealing with social media after a death.
- See the module [Death and School Crisis](#) for guidelines about addressing a death that affects many members of the school community.

The distinct features of a line-of-duty death affect both how the family learns of the death and how they are able to cope with the news.

of the deceased at the moment children learn of the death.

Nature of the Death

While each instance is unique, these are some of the issues family survivors may face:

- *These deaths tend to be sudden.*

News of the death is often sudden and shocking. There may be little or no time for survivors to prepare themselves emotionally. It may be difficult or impossible for family members to be with children of the deceased at the moment children learn of the death.

- *The death is often violent and intentional. It may be pre-meditated.*

One of the most troubling things within human experience is to know that a person you loved and counted on was intentionally targeted. Someone made a conscious choice to end the life of a person who was hugely important to you.

This choice is sometimes made in a deliberate and pre-meditated way. For example, an officer may be ambushed in a planned attack in revenge for an arrest or courtroom testimony. An attack may also have a random quality—an officer is chosen as a target simply because he or she is on duty at a given time and place.

- *Families may be present at the moment of death.*

In some instances, gang members have come to the family home specifically to ambush and kill the officer.

If an off-duty officer witnesses a crime occurring and takes steps to intervene, he or she is automatically on-duty. There have been cases where off-duty officers spending time with their families respond to a crime and are killed in their family's view.

- *Inadvertent or accidental deaths sometimes occur.*

Coping with an inadvertent line-of-duty death (otherwise known as “friendly fire” or accidental death) is complicated. It raises extremely challenging questions about loyalty, trust, belonging and forgiveness.

- *Information about and reactions to the death are extremely public.*

Families must instantly deal with a range of public reactions and information about the death. Judgments may be made about the officer's choices, actions and intentions, and some criticisms may be quite harsh.

- *Survivors may be troubled if they perceive a lack of meaning in the death.*

Line-of-duty deaths may not be classically “heroic.” An officer might try to stop a suspect and be killed in the process, while the criminal escapes. Someone might die in a car crash on the way to the scene of a crime, never actually arriving to offer help. Survivors may be devastated by the sense of “waste” in such a death, a feeling that it has made no measurable positive difference in the world.

Notification

Police departments will withhold public identification of the deceased until families have been reached.

Traditional news sources, however, may not respect these guidelines. Families sometimes first hear of a loved one's death in a breaking news broadcast.

Social media is even more likely to pass along information without regard to the sensibilities of survivors. Families may hear of the death on Facebook. Images of the scene or videos of a shootout in process may be posted long before police department representatives can reach the family.

This creates particular challenges in the school setting for children of a fallen officer. During a classroom break, or even within the classroom itself, news of a line-of-duty death may spread quickly. School professionals should have plans in place to quickly identify and reach out to children of police officers in the event of a line-of-duty death.

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Heightened Vulnerability

A line-of-duty death usually creates a heightened sense of vulnerability for survivors. For example, children who have been reassured repeatedly of a parent's training, skill and preparation to carry out law enforcement duties are now left to wonder, "If this could happen to my dad, who was trained, armed and ready for any crisis, what could happen to everyone else I love—people who are not trained at all?"

Often, the perpetrators continue to be at large for some time. This can be quite frightening to children, and actual threats of retribution toward the family may be real.

Children may experience a high level of separation anxiety and fear. For example, if their surviving parent leaves their side they may become anxious. They may be afraid to ride in a car if their parent died in a car crash.

Traumatic Aspects

Line-of-duty deaths often carry three qualities that are likely to make the death of their family member more traumatic for all children.

1. *Violent.* Deaths that involve mutilation or great suffering, or are gruesome in some way, are most disturbing. Children may have direct information about the violent nature of the death (e.g., because of press photos or social media posts), or powerful fantasies about what it was like.
2. *Intentional.* The death was deliberately caused by someone with malicious intent.
3. *Violating laws and norms.* The death was caused by someone who was violating conventional norms and laws.

Children may find themselves experiencing recurrent, intrusive images of a horrible death. This can make it difficult for them to create and cherish positive remembrance of the deceased—an important part of grieving.

3. Public Matters Affect Personal Responses

- See the module [Guilt and Shame](#) to understand more about these common reactions among grieving children and identify steps that can help children cope.
- See the module [Peer Support](#) for steps that can create an environment of positive support among the peers of a grieving child.
- See the module [Funeral Attendance](#) for practical advice on funeral attendance that school professionals can share with families.
- See the module [Commemoration and Memorialization](#) for important guidelines about policies and practices within schools that ensure these activities are appropriate and supportive.

A line-of-duty death is inevitably a public event. Often, an entire community is profoundly affected by the death. The highly visible quality of the public's reactions can provide solace and support to a grieving family, but they can also create special pressures.

For example, public responses often call out the heroic and noble quality of the officer's death. Many people make public comments about this idealized figure they did not actually know. This can be confusing to grieving children—they are grieving a parent, not a hero. They are grieving someone real, not an idealized notion of a superhero. They weren't looking for someone to save the world. They wanted a parent who would be there for them, to protect and support them, to help them grow.

In some cases, this "hero" figure may not fit children's picture of what their parent was like. It can be difficult for children to reconcile public perceptions with personal experience if the parent was neglectful, absent or abusive. If an adolescent was struggling with issues of autonomy and independence, there may have been considerable friction with the parent.

Public reaction can also be critical and negative, which can be particularly wrenching to the family. The officer may be portrayed as a perpetrator, or as someone who "got what she deserved."

It is not unusual for children to respond to these conflicting experiences with confusion or feelings of guilt and shame. They may believe that if they had done things differently, their family member would have avoided the dangerous situation or tried harder to survive.

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Grieving Without Privacy

In the immediate aftermath of a line-of-duty death, many people typically come to the family's home. The police chief and mayor are likely to appear. The officer's colleagues will often come by. Local and state politicians may show up. Reporters are usually present.

At one level, all of this attention can be gratifying. They appreciate the recognition of their parent. On the other hand, the lack of privacy is challenging for the entire family. The constant flow of people can be tiring, exhausting and over-stimulating. Children may not know how they are expected to respond. They may feel they are supposed to "buck up" and be strong when they actually feel like falling apart and crying.

A Different Sort of Funeral

The funeral of a slain officer is also an exceptionally public event. Often, it focuses more on what the community is looking for, not what the family wants. Typically, law enforcement personnel from all over the world attend the funeral, coming from as many as 300-500 different jurisdictions.

Hundreds or thousands of community members may attend. These events are frequently televised. News media are present. The family's grief is publicly displayed, in the moment of the funeral or memorial, and forever after online.

Every aspect of the service is planned and performed under great scrutiny. A family's, or a child's, personal wishes may not be taken into consideration. For some families, there is a sense that the process is honoring the job as much as or more than it honors their loved one.

In some cases, there are multiple memorial services—one local, one at the state level and one at the national level. This means the family may go through this experience repeatedly.

Peers: Supportive or Challenging

Peers can have a range of reactions when a classmate loses a parent or family member through a line-of-duty death. In our culture we do not generally talk about death, so children, like many adults, often have no idea what to say to a grieving peer.

These deaths can also cause anxiety among all students—they are unexpected, violent, and frightening, and they represent a breakdown of social order. Some students may cope with their discomfort by teasing or harassing the grieving child.

In fact, in a survey of children and teen survivors carried out by C.O.P.S., one of the most common sources of distress was perceived negative peer reactions. This included classmates making jokes about the deceased officer, circumstances of the death, changes in the grieving child's behavior or changes in the child's family situation.

National Police Week

In May each year, [National Police Week](#) is recognized in Washington, D.C. This includes National Peace Officers Memorial Day on May 15. A series of events provide recognition to fallen officers and support to survivors. Between 25,000 and 40,000 people attend each year.

Many families look forward to the sense of community and belonging of National Police Week. Some families feel they are "memorialed out," and prefer not to attend.

Regardless of how they feel about the event, survivors of line-of-duty deaths usually experience an anniversary effect during May. Both on the anniversary of the actual death and during National Police Week, they are reminded of the events surrounding the death and often re-visit the intense grief of that time.

4. Grief Over Time

- See the module [Grief Triggers](#) to understand what triggers are and how to offer support to children experiencing a grief trigger.
- See the module [Providing Support Over Time](#) for practical guidelines on offering support to grieving children beyond the immediate aftermath of a death.
- See the module [Secondary and Cumulative Losses](#) to understand more about additional losses grieving children experience in the months and years after a death.

Grief is not a one-time or short-term event. Children who have lost a parent or other close family member will experience that loss over their lifetime. School professionals can offer support that helps children stay on track academically, emotionally and socially.



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Police Survivors: Constant Reminders

Survivors of line-of-duty deaths are constantly reminded of the death and their loss, even more so than most other bereaved families.

News and commentary about the death may be present in conventional and social media for weeks or months. For years to come, whenever similar events occur locally or nationally, the story may be repeated and images posted. The local community may commemorate the event on anniversaries with news stories or public memorial services.

Posted comments about the officer at online newspaper sites or in social media can be quite horrible. Even if a family chooses not to view such comments, they may filter down to conversations within the community, and sometimes to conversations on school grounds.

Other line-of-duty deaths reported in the news are likely to remind the family of their own experiences.

Legal system issues can go on for years. There will be an ongoing investigation of the incident, including efforts to identify and apprehend the perpetrators. If an arrest is made, there are likely to be hearings and trials that bring the death into the public's eye again. The family, including children, may be asked to testify at trials.

During hearings and trials, survivors must cope with the unsettling presence of a defense attorney who is trying to protect the person believed to have killed their loved one.

If a conviction is won, survivors are likely to be affected by the sentencing. Did the accused express remorse? Does the punishment match the loss they experienced? Is there a chance of future parole?

Typically, families take upon themselves the responsibility of monitoring parole hearings for the perpetrator. Children may testify at such hearings, every time the possibility of parole comes up. Well into their adult years, they may still be re-visiting the death as they prepare for and then attend these hearings. They answer the same sorts of questions repeatedly and many have to testify again about their experiences.

Families who watch TV or movies of any type are likely to see previews and promotionals of popular crime dramas and procedurals. Many of these scenes may remind them of the death, the hearings, the trial or other aspects of their loss. Some types of popular music glorify criminal behavior, killing of police officers or disrespecting law enforcement. This can also be painful for families.

Talking With Others

Children who have lost a parent in a line-of-duty death may find it difficult to discuss their loss over time. They may wish to keep the experience private. They may feel embarrassment or shame about the incident, especially if there were accusations that the officer made poor choices or acted inappropriately. They may be uncertain about how others will respond and whether people will be judgmental about the incident.

It is not unusual for children who attend a new school or college to avoid talking about the experience altogether.

This emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for children and youth to speak about their experiences in a judgment-free setting, such as National Police Week events.

Secondary Losses

Secondary losses are the changes in relationships, finances and lifestyle that often accompany a death in the family. In addition to these common changes, there are some distinct issues common in line-of-duty deaths.

The police community is a strong one, and belonging is important for officers and their families. The community is likely to be deeply supportive at the time of the death, but this can change over time.

For families of living officers, the survivors of an officer killed in the line of duty are a painful reminder that their loved ones are also at risk every day of their lives. These are difficult issues to discuss, and many people do not feel skilled enough to talk about such matters.

For survivors, spending time with families who have not experienced a loss such as theirs can also be difficult. Children may feel resentful that their parent died and other children's parents did not.

As mentioned previously, opportunities to spend time at National Police Week with families who have also suffered a line-of-duty death can be especially helpful.



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5. Giving & Getting Support

- See the module [Providing Support Over Time](#) for suggestions about supporting grieving children in the years after a death occurs.
- See the module [Professional Preparation](#) for a discussion of professional development resources addressing student bereavement.
- See the module [Professional Self-Care](#) for guidelines that address the challenges of offering support to grieving students.

Every child and every family respond to death in unique ways. Every situation is unique. However, grieving children and families also face a number of common challenges and similar experiences as they cope with their loss and move forward in their lives.

Two important things school professionals can do to support children and families who have experienced the death of a loved one, whatever the circumstances, are (1) speak up and express interest and concern, and (2) listen to children and their families. This is the best way to learn about their distinct experiences and understand what kind of support will be most helpful.

School professionals play a unique role in supporting grieving students both in the immediate aftermath of a loss and over time.

The website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students (www.grievingstudents.org) provides extensive information about children and grief. The materials are specifically geared towards the roles and responsibilities of school professionals. We encourage you to use the videos and written materials on this website as your primary resource for learning more about providing support to grieving children.

National Police Week

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy signed a proclamation designating May 15 as Peace Officers Memorial Day, and the week in which it falls as [National Police Week](#).

Each year, 25,000 to 40,000 people attend programs in Washington, D.C. to honor fallen officers. This includes tens of thousands of law enforcement officers from around the world as well as family survivors of the fallen. Attendees may participate in a range of activities, including a candlelight vigil, a memorial service and the National Police Survivors' Conference.

Some children who have lost a parent or other family member through a line-of-duty death do not wish to attend these events. Others may wish to attend for a year or two after the death, but not beyond.

Many children, however, find it a great benefit to attend

every year. They receive unique assistance and support themselves and have the opportunity to provide support to others.

We encourage schools to arrange appropriate leave time for children and teens who wish to attend National Police Week. This can be one of the most important resources for support over time.

Concerns of Police Survivors: C.O.P.S.

[Concerns of Police Survivors \(C.O.P.S.\)](#) is a national non-profit organization that hosts the National Police Survivors' Conference held during National Police Week. They also offer programs for families and individual survivors of line-of-duty deaths. Programs include Kids Camp, Teen Outward Bound, Young Adults Camp and supportive programs for other family members. For college-age students, there is also a scholarship program through the organization.

Their mission is to rebuild the shattered lives of survivors and co-workers affected by line of duty deaths, through partnerships with law enforcement and the community.

Professional Self-Care

Supporting grieving children is a rewarding endeavor for school professionals. Indeed, there are few ways to have a more meaningful and lasting impact on children. However, this can also be painful and challenging work.

The website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students offers [practical suggestions for professional self-care](#).





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6. What to Do: Survivors of Line-of-Duty Deaths

- See the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) for information about talking with and supporting grieving children.

Here are some steps that will help school professionals provide meaningful support to children who have lost a parent or other close family member through a line-of-duty death.

1. Be informed about supporting grieving children generally. In most ways, children's grief experiences are similar whatever the cause of a loved one's death might be. Whenever possible, take steps to support professional development about children and grief within your school or district.
2. Be informed about the unique issues of law enforcement survivors. Learn more about the unique culture of those serving in law enforcement. Reading the material in this module will help.
3. Speak up and offer support to children and families. Do more listening than talking. Listen "neutrally"—avoid describing the deceased as a hero. This gives children the chance to describe their own memories and experience and allows them to express themselves more honestly and openly.

See the modules [Talking With Children](#), [What Not to Say](#), [Other Reactions](#).

4. Take proactive steps to educate all students about death and teach skills about how to support a grieving peer. This will lower anxiety for all students. It will also decrease incidents of teasing or other insensitive peer reactions when a student is grieving.
5. Watch for incidents of teasing or harassment of a grieving child and step in to intervene when necessary. The death of a classmate's parent or close family member can be difficult for peers. Line-of-duty deaths may be particularly disturbing. They represent a disruption of the social order that can be frightening. Teasing is not an unusual reaction—it is a way some children manage their anxiety or confusion. In most cases, children do not intend to be cruel to a classmate. They usually respond positively to opportunities to ask questions of a teacher or other school professional, along with guidance on how to express appropriate condolences.

See the module [Peer Support](#).

6. Monitor exposure to media coverage on police actions or police deaths, particularly soon after a child experiences a loss. It may be useful to limit children's exposure to negative media about police behaviors or coverage related to deaths of other police officers. Children may appreciate a "check-in" when negative media coverage is quite heavy (e.g., have they seen the coverage? How does it feel to hear these kinds of things?)
7. Support students' attendance at [National Police Week](#) and/or the [C.O.P.S. summer camp programs](#). This is a source of significant and meaningful support for many children.
8. Work as a team over time. A school team might include educators, administrators and support staff familiar with a student's personality, academic performance, social connections and family. Coordinating efforts over time can help students at vulnerable moments, such as transitions to new grades or schools, anniversaries of the death, and other events that may bring up feelings of grief (e.g., graduation; parent-child events; concerts, athletic events and science fairs).

See the modules [Coordinating Services](#) & [Supporting Transitions and Grief Triggers](#)

9. Accommodate grieving students' challenges with learning. Academic challenges are extremely common among grieving children. It is appropriate and helpful for schools to make adjustments in assignments and exams, arrange for makeup assignments or provide tutoring or other support.

See the module [Impact on Learning](#).

10. Get support for your own responses and feelings. Supporting grieving children is rewarding but can also be difficult. Seek support from colleagues, friends or professionals.

See the modules [Professional Preparation](#) and [Professional Self-Care](#).



Additional Modules Available at grievingstudents.org

Conversation & Support

[Talking With Children](#)

[What Not to Say](#)

[Providing Support Over Time](#)

[Peer Support](#)

Developmental & Cultural Considerations

[Concepts of Death](#)

[Connecting With Families](#)

[Cultural Sensitivity](#)

Practical Considerations

[Funeral Attendance](#)

[Secondary and Cumulative Losses](#)

[Coordinating Services & Supporting Transitions](#)

[Social Media](#)

Reactions & Triggers

[Impact on Learning](#)

[Guilt and Shame](#)

[Other Reactions](#)

[Grief Triggers](#)

Professional Preparation & Self-Care

[Professional Preparation](#)

[Professional Self-Care](#)

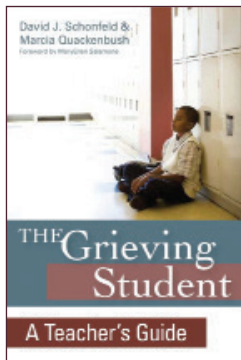
Crisis & Special Circumstances

[Death and School Crisis](#)

[Suicide](#)

[Commemoration and Memorializations](#)

[Potentially Life-Limiting Conditions](#)



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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