



Mini-Articles | January 2015 – October 2016

*The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work), which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld. The Coalition created [grievingstudents.org](http://grievingstudents.org), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.*

# Contents

## Conversation & Support

### *Talking With Children*

- [\*Talking with Grieving Children\*](#)

### *What Not to Say*

- [\*Supporting Grieving Students: What Not to Say\*](#)

### *Providing Support Over Time*

- [\*Back to School: Remember That Transitions Can Be Tough for Grieving Students\*](#)
- [\*A Quick Quiz: Supporting Grieving Children Over Time\*](#)

### *Peer Support*

- [\*“Your mommy died. You can’t make a Mother’s Day card!”\*](#)
- [\*Support Grieving Children by Teaching Skills to Their Peers\*](#)
- [\*5 Questions Children Often Have When a Classmate is Grieving\*](#)

## Developmental & Cultural Considerations

### *Concepts of Death*

- [\*4 Concepts about Death that Children Need to Know\*](#)
- [\*Do Children Want to Talk About Death?\*](#)
- [\*School Professionals Can Help Students Understand Death\*](#)

### *Connecting with Families*

- [\*9 Goals for Communicating with Grieving Families\*](#)
- [\*School Staff Play a Special Role with Bereaved Families\*](#)
- [\*What to Tell Parents: Guidance for Bereaved Families\*](#)

### *Cultural Sensitivity*

- [\*Grief across Cultures: Teacher Worries About “Doing Something Wrong”\*](#)
- [\*3 Tips: Supporting Grieving Students from Different Cultures\*](#)
- [\*Supporting Grieving Families: Q&A about Cultural Competence\*](#)

## Practical Considerations

### *Funeral Attendance*

- [\*To Help Grieving Families, Offer Advice on Funeral Attendance\*](#)
- [\*Death in the School Community: What Policies Should Schools Set About Funeral Attendance?\*](#)
- [\*When a Loved One Dies: Is Funeral Attendance Good for Children?\*](#)

## Practical Considerations (Cont'd)

### *Secondary & Cumulative Losses*

- [\*For Children, Death Takes Away More Than a Loved One\*](#)
- [\*Even in Violent Communities, Children Don't "Get Used To Death"\*](#)
- [\*After a Death, More Losses Await\*](#)

### *Coordinating Services & Supporting Transitions*

- [\*Support for Grieving Students: A team Makes it Happen\*](#)
- [\*Grieving Students and Transitions: Vulnerable Times\*](#)
- [\*When Older Students Experience Grief: Special Concerns\*](#)

### *Social Media*

- [\*Social Media and Grieving Children: Helpful or Harmful?\*](#)
- [\*Social Media and School Response to a Death: Prepare Your School by Doing an Audit\*](#)
- [\*Offer Positive Guidance to Grieving Students about Social Media\*](#)

## Reactions & Triggers

### *Impact on Learning*

- [\*For Grieving Students: Keep Academic Challenges from Becoming Academic Failures\*](#)
- [\*Difficulty Concentrating: A Hallmark of Grief\*](#)
- [\*Anticipate Challenges to Learning Among Grieving Students\*](#)

### *Guilt & Shame*

- [\*Guilt, Shame and Grief: Understand Common Reactions in Students\*](#)
- [\*These 2 Steps Can Help Grieving Children Deal with Guilt and Shame\*](#)
- [\*Grieving Students: Why Children Feel Guilty After a Death\*](#)

### *Others Reactions*

- [\*Grieving Children's Reactions Sometimes Confuse Adults\*](#)
- [\*"His mom died and he didn't even look sad"—Understanding Children's Reactions to Death\*](#)
- [\*Writing, Art and Play: Non-Verbal Ways to Support Grieving Children\*](#)

### *Grief Triggers*

- [\*Supporting Grieving Children: What to Know About Grief Triggers\*](#)
- [\*Support Grieving Students: Use These 7 Steps to Respond to Grief Triggers\*](#)
- [\*Support Grieving Children: Frame Lessons in Ways That Minimize Grief Triggers\*](#)
- [\*Grief Over the Holidays: Educators Can Help Students Cope\*](#)
- [\*Remembrance & Bereavement on Memorial Day: Supporting Children\*](#)
- [\*Father's Day May Not Be Easy for Some Students\*](#)
- [\*For Mother's Day, Being Thoughtful in a Different Way Can Help Support Students\*](#)
- [\*Halloween and Grieving Students: A Check-In Can Help\*](#)

## Professional Preparation & Self-Care

### *Professional Preparation*

- [Quiz: Are You Ready to Support Grieving Students](#)
- [Preparing School Professionals: Support for Grieving Students](#)

### *Professional Self-Care*

- [Supporting Grieving Students? Take Care of Yourself, Too](#)
- [“Quite Often, They Are Worn Thin”: When School Professional Support Grieving Students](#)

## Crisis & Special Circumstances

### *Death and School Crisis*

- [Plan Ahead to Cope With Death and School Crisis](#)
- [Death in a School Community: Four Goals for Supporting Students](#)

### *Suicide*

- [Grieving Students: Three Things to Know about Death by Suicide](#)
- [Preventing Another Suicide: Postvention](#)

### *Commemoration and Memorialization*

- [Commemorating a Death: What Should Schools Do?](#)
- [Commemorating a Death: Stories from Three Educators](#)

### *Potentially Life-Limiting Conditions*

- [For Students with Life-Limiting Conditions, Get Peers Involved](#)
- [Support for a Seriously Ill Student: What Teachers Can Do](#)

## Talking with Grieving Children

*“A lot of people stayed away from me and didn’t really talk to me a lot.”*  
- Quentin

Imagine a child or youth you might come across in your work as a school professional. Imagine this child has experienced something deeply troubling and painful. Many people—both adults and peers—know about this event. But few, or perhaps none, actually speak up to offer the child support, caring and understanding.

Even if we don’t know the specifics, we can envision some of the consequences. The child is likely to feel isolated, disturbed by feelings of guilt or shame, and have trouble concentrating on school work. There’s a good chance this troubling event is going to contribute to difficulties socially, emotionally and academically over time.

This, unfortunately, is the actual scenario for many children who experience the death of someone close—a parent, other family member, friend. Peers, teachers and other adults feel an awkwardness about the subject of death. They worry that mentioning it will only cause more distress. They don’t know what to do about the child’s suffering. They don’t know what to say.

### **Grief in Children is Common**

Our awkwardness discussing death and grief poses a serious problem. The experience of grief is not unusual for children. By the time they finish high school, nearly all will have experienced the death of someone close—a family member, a good friend, a teacher, a favorite neighbor. About 5% will experience the death of a parent while they are in school.

What can school professionals do to support grieving children? Some surprisingly simple steps can make a world of difference to students and their families.

One of the simplest and most important is to express concern directly to the student. You might say, “I was so sorry to hear about the death of your grandfather. How are you doing? How is your family?”

### **Invite the Conversation**

Everyone responds to grief differently, but virtually all students will appreciate such simple gestures. In fact, many would like to talk further about their experiences—and their thoughts, feelings and fears.

Teachers and other school staff are excellent choices to provide this support. In most cases, they are more removed from the person who died. Children don’t need to shield school staff the same way they might want to protect their parents, who often are also grieving. They can ask a teacher or school counselor questions and say things that they might hold back from their families.

Open-ended questions and a willingness to “listen more and talk less” let children know you’re available for the conversation. Even if a child seems uninterested in talking at first, it’s helpful to

maintain this kind of contact over time. Their questions often evolve. It may take some time for them to figure out how to put what they're feeling into words.

These simple but powerful steps can make an immense difference in a child's adjustment to the death of someone close. Making this connection supports the child's emotional and social development and can help strengthen academic functioning during a challenging period.

### **Find Out More**

School staff and others who work with children and youth can learn more at the newly launched website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website offers a range of modules that address issues related to children and grief. The skills and guidelines in these modules can help school staff support grieving children.

The first module, *Talking With Children*, offers practical suggestions for how school professionals can initiate a conversation with students who have recently experienced the death of a close family member or friend. It discusses why it is important for teachers to reach out to students after a loss and initiate a conversation. Interviews with children, parents and staff share real-world examples of teachers and others school staff who have helped grieving children and their families. Viewers can download, review and print module summaries.

A specially-developed set of video simulations demonstrate how to talk with grieving and children. The videos provide a realistic sense of what these conversations might be like. There are moments of awkwardness, silences, children who are obviously experiencing painful thoughts, and teachers who succeed in reaching out, starting a conversation and providing much-needed support.

### **Make the Difference**

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* provides tools that can help school staff fulfill one of the most important functions of their careers—make a genuine difference in students' lives and their abilities to grow well and learn well.

## Supporting Grieving Students: What Not to Say

*When one of my students returned to class after a week away, I said, “Good to see you! Where have you been?”*

*He said, “Oh, we had a family thing.” He was vague. Then he sat at his desk, and I could see he was distracted. I was totally shocked to hear later that day that his father had died.*

*I told one of my colleagues, “Well, with a boy like this—private, kind of withdrawn—I think I just need to wait for some sort of signal that he wants to talk. I honestly don’t know what I could say that would make him feel any better.”*

*And this other teacher said, “Oh, no. We need to speak directly to students who are grieving and let them know we’re thinking of them. Then they can decide if they want to talk more. I already talked to him, and I think he found it helpful.”*

*So at my next class, I asked this student to stay after for a moment. I told him I was sorry to hear his father had died and asked how he was doing. He said he was fine. But a week later, he asked to speak with me again. He said he was having a hard time concentrating, and our coursework was the most difficult for him right now.*

*I told him I expected he’d find it easier to concentrate over time, and that we could make some adjustments for now. We changed some of his assignments for the coming weeks, and he just started checking in regularly after that.\**

What should you say to a grieving child? A third grader whose mother just died of cancer? A 16-year-old whose brother was shot and killed in a drive-by? An eighth grader whose beloved uncle, serving in the military, has been killed in action?

Many of us—perhaps most—aren’t at all sure how to approach that kind of conversation. We might hesitate or hold back. We might wonder whether anything we say can possibly alleviate the child’s suffering. We might worry that we’ll say the wrong thing.

This is when adults are likely to make the most harmful choice of all—to say nothing. This actually communicates to children that you don’t care, or aren’t available, or aren’t confident that the child can cope.

Do people say clumsy things in response to a death? All the time. But understanding what *not* to say can help school professionals be more confident and effective when they do reach out to grieving students.

Consider these common remarks. They are well-intentioned, but not helpful:

- *I know just how you feel.* You cannot. Each child’s experience is unique. Until children tell us what they are feeling, we can’t really know.
- *You must be incredibly angry/sad/frightened/confused.* It is more useful to ask children how they are feeling than to tell them.



- *At least you had the holidays together before she died.* Statements such as this are likely to quiet down true expressions of grief.

So what *should* adults say to children? Open-ended questions are usually most helpful.

- How are you doing? How is your family doing?
- What are some memories you have about your father?
- Tell me more about what this past week has been like for you, after you learned your sister died.

### **Find Out More**

The website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) provides a module specifically addressing “What Not to Say.” Geared towards school professionals, it includes a video and a downloadable module summary with more examples, along with concrete suggestions that can help caring adults speak up and support grieving children effectively.

*\*This is a composite case example.*

## A Quick Quiz: Supporting Grieving Children Over Time

Most K-12 students will experience the death of a loved one before they complete high school. School professionals can play an essential role in providing support that helps children make sense of these experiences and stay productive in their school and personal lives.

How much do you know about ways to provide support to grieving children over time? Take this quiz and find out. Then check out the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) for self-paced modules to learn more.

### Quiz: Support Over Time

1. Most children will adjust to a major loss such as the death of a family member or close friend after about a year.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
2. School professionals who are not personally affected by the death in a deep way are often ideal sources of support.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
3. School personnel can best offer support to grieving children when they work as a team to meet students' needs.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
4. When teachers talk about death in the classroom as part of regular coursework, it helps all students learn more about how to give and receive support.	<b>T</b>	<b>T</b>
5. Teachers can help grieving students stay on track academically by making it clear they're expected to complete their assignments fully and on time, just as their classmates do.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
6. When grieving children experience support and understanding from their teachers, they may find it easier to turn to adult family members for support as well.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
7. If a grieving student reveals family issues to a teacher, such as a parent struggling with depression, the teacher should hold that information in confidence to help build greater trust.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
8. The second year after a death is usually much easier on children than the first.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
9. Children who lose a parent are often reminded of the loss throughout their lives at times of normal transition, such as graduations, marriage or having children of their own.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>
10. It can be helpful when teachers make a special effort to contact grieving students and offer support for special events, such as holidays, birthday or other celebrations.	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>

#### Answers:

1. *False.* Adjusting to a major loss is a process that lasts a lifetime.
2. *True.* School professionals are concerned, accessible, competent and more detached from the raw emotions being experienced by the child.
3. *True.* Team members can take on different tasks to offer support to children and their families and share information about how children are doing.
4. *True.* Teachers can model how to discuss grief and express concern and caring. Without this modeling, many children are unsure about what to say or do.

5. *False.* It is common for grieving children to have trouble concentrating and experience a drop in academic performance for some time after the death. Teachers can make appropriate adjustments to help them stay on course academically.
6. *True.* The modeling offered by teachers helps children better understand how to speak with other adults.
7. *False.* If students reveal family issues, they are looking for help solving these problems. Teachers can arrange appropriate referrals.
8. *False.* The second year after a death often seems more challenging than the first.
9. *True.* In many ways, children never get over a significant loss. It is a lifelong experience.
10. *True.* Children experience grief differently over time. Special events often bring up deep feelings about the loss.

**“Your mommy died. You can’t make a Mother’s Day card!”**

Would children really say such things to a grieving classmate? Yes, they sometimes do. Is it because they are being cruel? In most cases, no. It may be because they have questions, anxiety and confusion about what has happened to their peer.

Our organization is a member of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students*. The Coalition encourages school professionals to talk with students of all ages about death, grief and ways to offer support. Addressing these topics in class helps students better understand how to reach out to a grieving classmate. And that’s what most children truly want to do.

Find resources and learn more at [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org).

## **Support Grieving Children by Teaching Skills to Their Peers**

*“I thought coming back to school after my father died would be a lot harder than it was. But it was actually a really good experience because the second I came in, all of my friends, which were 31 classmates at the time, they all just rushed and gave me a hug, including my teacher. And I felt like I couldn’t breathe, but it made me really happy to be back.”*

Children, like adults, are often uncertain about how to support a grieving peer. They want to help their friends, but they may hold back or unintentionally isolate a peer who has experienced a death in the family.

School professionals can equip students with skills that help them offer genuine support to a classmate. This can make a profound difference for grieving students.

Our organization is a member of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students*. The Coalition encourages discussions with students of all ages about death, grief and ways to offer support. Addressing these topics in class helps students better understand how to reach out to a grieving classmate.

Find resources and learn more at [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org).

## 5 Questions Children Often Have When a Classmate is Grieving

Grief and loss are common among children and teens—almost all students will experience the death of a close friend or family member before they complete their schooling. Children often have questions, anxiety and confusion about what has happened to a grieving classmate. While every child is different, here are some questions they commonly have.

1. Could someone I love also die? My parents? My siblings?
2. What does it actually mean when someone has died?
3. How will this affect our classmate and his or her family?
4. What can I do? I'm worried about members of my own family dying.
5. I have no idea what to say or do to be supportive to our classmate. Can you help me figure it out?

Find guidance about answering these questions at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member. Help students better understand how to reach out to a grieving classmate and learn to get support for their own concerns or anxieties.

#### **4 Concepts about Death that Children Need to Know**

Children are aware of death from an early age. They may lose a pet. They see depictions of death in movies or TV shows (including cartoons). For some, a family member may die.

Many things about death can be confusing to children. There are four essential concepts children need to understand about death before they can truly comprehend a loss. Most will understand these concepts by age 5 to 7, but children who are much younger can be helped to understand them. And even adolescents can raise questions as they try to accept these concepts after a personal loss.

The four concepts are:

1. Death is irreversible.
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.
4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* (of which this organization is a member) offers materials on its website ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) that explain these concepts in more detail. You can find suggestions about how to discuss the concepts with children. These discussions can help children cope more effectively if someone they know dies, or if they have a grieving friend or classmate.

## **Do Children Want to Talk About Death?**

Children are naturally curious, and death is one of the first things they are curious about. In fact, children first seek to engage adults in a dialogue related to life and death when they are only 6-12 months old!

This is the time when children first develop what is called “object permanence”—the concept that someone who is out of view still exists in another place.

To explore this concept, infants all over the world begin to play a game we call peek-a-boo. They see someone. That person disappears (often behind a blanket). The infant shows heightened awareness and then concern. The blanket falls, the person reappears, and everyone laughs and expresses joy at this reunion.

Infants play this game over and over again, learning something about permanence and loss each time they do so.

As they grow older, children continue to attempt these dialogues with adults, often through play or artwork. Frequently, adults don’t understand what children are asking. Children don’t know other ways to express their questions.

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* (of which this organization is a member) offers materials on its website ([www.grievingstudent.org](http://www.grievingstudent.org)) that discuss concepts of death and describe how school professionals can engage in meaningful and constructive dialogues about death with children and teens. These discussions can help children master necessary information and reduce anxiety. Learn more at the Coalition’s website.



## **School Professionals Can Help Students Understand Death**

Children need to understand four essential concepts about death before they can truly comprehend a loss.

The four concepts are:

1. Death is irreversible.
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.
4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

School professionals who know about these concepts can better understand children's thoughts and reactions to death—an actual loss, a TV show or movie, or even an imagined death. This makes it easier to talk with students. It's also useful when providing advice to parents wanting to help their children cope with a loss.

There are many benefits to meaningful conversations with children about death. For example, when children and teens are not clear about why a person died, they may assume it's because of something they did. They may feel guilty. They may feel they are in some way responsible for the death.

Clear, supportive conversations can help children cope with death in more constructive ways. This can help them manage and resolve feelings of guilt.

Learn more about how to discuss concepts about death with children of all ages and provide appropriate support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals.

## **9 Goals for Communicating with Grieving Families**

School professionals have a vital role to play providing support to grieving students and their families. It is important to reach out and make contact with families after a death. An in-person or telephone contact are usually preferred but an e-mail may also be appropriate if the family does not respond to outreach attempts.

Here are 9 goals for communicating with grieving families:

1. Express condolences on behalf of the school community.
2. Offer suggestions and advice on how to support grieving children.
3. Remind parents or other guardians of their critical role supporting children at this time.
4. Assist with students' transition back to school.
5. Seek feedback about how children are doing.
6. Offer supportive resources in school and community.
7. Identify and anticipate potential challenges.
8. Partner with families to support children over time.
9. Provide appropriate reassurance and positive feedback.

You can find more information about these goals, along with additional suggestions about communicating with families, at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **School Staff Play a Special Role with Bereaved Families**

When children experience the death of a family member or close friend, school staff can play a unique and important role for their families.

For example:

- *Schools are familiar and school staff are trusted.* The ongoing communication between schools and families often allows teachers to be trusted partners from the outset.
- *Families are usually looking for guidance.* Bereavement is challenging for every family, and most parents and guardians struggle with what to say and do. They welcome suggestions from someone who knows and cares about their child.
- *School staff may have knowledge other providers do not have.* School staff spend much more time with children than many other providers. They will have more opportunities to observe how children are coping socially, emotionally and academically.
- *The behavior school staff observe at school may not be the same as that exhibited at home.* Sometimes children express frustration or sadness at school, but cover these feelings up at home to protect their parents or guardians.
- *School staff can suggest resources for the family.* School staff can alert the family about community bereavement or mental health services that families may not be aware of.

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* (of which our organization is a member) offers more information and guidance about communicating with bereaved families. The materials on their website ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) are designed specifically for school professionals.

## **What to Tell Parents: Guidance for Bereaved Families**

School professionals have a vital role to play providing support to grieving students and their families. It is important to reach out and make contact with families after a death. Here are some messages to communicate to parents or guardians.

1. *The role of families is essential.* Your child looks to you more than anyone else for information and guidance on how to cope with this loss.
2. *Your child is concerned about you.* Children understand that death is distressing to their parents/guardians. They want to know how you are coping. They also want honest reassurance that you are safe and healthy.
3. *Your child is concerned about himself/herself.* Especially after the death of a parent, children worry about who will take care of them if their other parent (or current guardian) also dies.
4. *Honesty is essential.* Children need to understand the truth about the death of a loved one. Direct, clear language is best, using terms such as “died” and “dead,” rather than confusing euphemisms such as “asleep” or “at peace.”

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* (of which our organization is a member) offers more information and guidance about communicating with bereaved families. The materials at their website ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) are designed specifically for school professionals.

### **Grief across Cultures: Teacher Worries About “Doing Something Wrong”**

*“The grandmother of one of my students died. The two had been very close. I was invited to the family’s home for the visitation and wanted to be there to support my student. But then I found myself feeling hesitant. The family’s culture and religious practices were quite different from my own, and different from those of my other students. It would be unfamiliar. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Suddenly I was thinking, ‘What if I do or say something wrong?’”*  
- Fourth grade teacher

School personnel may not be familiar with the rituals and expectations of every culture represented among their students. Rather than reaching out to a family after the death of a loved one, some hold back, concerned they might do something inappropriate or offend the family.

Although there are real differences between cultures, the fundamental experience of grief is universal. Chances are quite good that a school professional who is thoughtful, sensitive and respectful will be able to help grieving students and provide meaningful support to their families.

For guidance on addressing grief with families from different cultures, visit the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website’s materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

### **3 Tips: Supporting Grieving Students from Different Cultures**

Different cultures respond to death in different ways. Some may be expressive and celebrate a life well-lived. Others may be quiet and reflective. While most school professionals are familiar with traditions of some students, they are unlikely to know all of the practices of each culture represented in their classroom or school.

For grieving students and their families, the support of school personnel is valuable and unique. When reaching across cultures in these situations, the following three tips can be helpful.

1. *Ask questions.* Ask openly when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual. For example:

“Can you help me understand how I can best be of help to you and your family?”

2. *Watch out for assumptions.* Many families blend traditions of several cultures. Assumptions about how a grieving family is expected to act because they come from a certain culture can cloud our perceptions. We might miss opportunities to be helpful.
3. *Be present and authentic.* Approach a grieving family with an open mind and heart. Be guided by their responses.

For more guidance on addressing grief with families from different cultures, check the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website’s materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Supporting Grieving Families: Q&A about Cultural Competence**

*Students in our school come from a lot of different cultures. What's a good way for me to learn about how their families deal with grief?*

We are all enriched when we learn about different cultural beliefs, expectations and traditions. Novels, movies, blogs and even textbooks about cultural differences can all be sources of helpful information.

One of the best ways to learn about a family's beliefs and practices in bereavement is to ask openly. You might ask how you could best be of help to a grieving family, or ask a family member to tell you more about how they will approach the grief and remembrance of their loved one.

*If a student's culture is not familiar to me, how can I be sure I won't do something inappropriate if I reach out to the family at a time of grief?*

We've all had the experience of being clumsy at a delicate moment with a friend or family member, or with a student or student's family. This is a natural and unavoidable part of human interactions.

When a family is grieving, we feel a greater obligation to be sensitive and supportive. This sincere desire to be helpful and genuine concern is actually our greatest asset. Even if we are not familiar with the specific customs of a family or its culture, we can be thoughtful and respectful. We can be observant. We can ask questions openly, and listen to responses carefully. These practices are experienced as helpful by almost all families, whatever their culture.

*What's the best way for me to become more skillful in supporting grieving students and families whose culture is different from my own?*

Although there are real differences in traditions between cultures, the fundamental experience of grief is universal. Rather than trying to gain knowledge about every culture, it's best to first aim to become competent in supporting a grieving individual in at least one culture. Probably your own would be a good start.

If someone is able to be thoughtful, empathic, sensitive and supportive to a grieving child of one culture, chances are quite good that this person will be able to help a child of another culture.

For more guidance on addressing grief with families from different cultures, check the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **To Help Grieving Families, Offer Advice on Funeral Attendance**

When a student has experienced the death of a loved one, school professionals have a unique opportunity to offer helpful guidance to families. Parents frequently contact schools immediately after the death, and before the funeral or memorial service has taken place.

This means that school personnel may be the only professionals in touch with the family during the time the funeral is being planned. Families may be confused about their child's role in the process. Some parents may want their child to participate. Others may hesitate, wishing to protect their child from what they fear will be a painful experience.

Ideally, children will be afforded the opportunity to make their own choice about funeral attendance. Most of the time, it is better if children do attend. They will feel more included, benefit from the support of family and friends, and learn more about coping with their own grief by watching others.

School professionals can offer guidance to families about the benefits of funeral attendance and how to best prepare a child for a funeral or memorial. For example, families can give children a sense of what will happen during the service. Will there be an open casket? Will many people be present? Is this likely to be an emotional and expressive service, or something more restrained?

Children will appreciate a chance to ask questions—even if they don't have any at the moment. During the service, it's helpful to request that an adult who is not as personally impacted by the death mentor the child through the experience, especially for younger children.

For more guidance on how school professionals can help families prepare children for funerals and memorials, check the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.



## **Death in the School Community: What Policies Should Schools Set About Funeral Attendance?**

A death in the school community—a student, teacher or staff member—touches many people. Students and school staff are likely to be deeply affected. Some individuals may wish to attend the funeral or memorial service.

In general, it is helpful when schools support attendance at services for interested students and staff. These services can provide comfort as people struggle to make sense of a loss.

It is important that attendance be a choice, not an expectation. Some students and staff may prefer not to attend, and their choices must be respected.

Schools will want to have policies and practices in place that address such matters as:

- Obtaining permission from parents for a student to attend if the service is during school hours. (For young children, it may be most appropriate to ask parents to personally accompany their child.)
- Hiring substitute teachers or arranging coverage in other ways so school personnel can attend.
- Considering whether to modify the school schedule to make it easier on students to attend if they wish (for example, ending the day early or postponing tests).
- Providing alternative activities for students who choose not to attend the funeral.

If many students and staff are likely to attend, schools should also talk with the family of the deceased to help them prepare. The family may decide to hold the service at a larger location. If this is not practical, or doesn't meet the needs and wishes of the family, members of the school community might plan alternative ways to show their caring and remembrance.

In most cases, it's best to avoid using school facilities for funeral services, especially if the body of the deceased will be present. This can create painful associations with that space for students and staff in the future. However, religious schools may have an on-site space (such as a chapel) that would be appropriate.

For more guidance on ways schools can plan sound policies, as well as how school professionals can help families prepare children for these events, visit the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **When a Loved One Dies: Is Funeral Attendance Good for Children?**

Families may turn to school personnel for advice on funeral attendance. Will it cause unnecessary pain for their grieving child? Is it acceptable for the child to play a role in the memorial proceedings? How can families prepare and support children before and during the service?

There are a number of benefits for children who attend funeral or memorial services.

- They feel included and affirmed.
- They are comforted by the support of family and friends.
- They may gain support from the family's spiritual community.
- They learn more about their own grief when they see the different ways people grieve and seek support.
- They appreciate participating in an important event or ritual.

In most situations, it is helpful for children to attend the funeral or memorial of a loved one. When children are not included, they may feel hurt, discounted or excluded. In some cases, they create fantasies about the service that are far more frightening than what actually occurs.

For more guidance on how families can prepare children for these events, visit the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **For Children, Death Takes Away More Than a Loved One**

When children lose a parent or other close family member, they mourn that person. Most school professionals understand and expect this.

However, there are additional losses related to the death that can affect children deeply. These are often less familiar to families and school professionals alike.

The death is considered a *primary loss*. Events and changes that occur as the result of the death are considered *secondary losses*.

Common secondary losses include:

- *Changed relationships.* Children may no longer see people who were friends and associates of the deceased. Some of these relationships may seem incidental to adults, but they can be quite significant to children.
- *Change in school.* If a family must move after a death, children may lose touch with old friends while having to adjust to a new school environment.
- *Change in lifestyle.* If a family faces financial challenges after a death, they may move to a smaller home. There may be less money to support participation in extracurricular activities. Reduced family resources circumstances may lead to loss of status for children among their peers.
- *A parent who is less available.* A surviving parent may have to work more and have less time to spend with children. A parent struggling with depression may not be emotionally available.
- *Change in future plans.* If a parent or provider has died, teens may not be able to follow through on plans for college or career training. They may face financial challenges or feel an obligation to keep the family together rather than move away.

When school personnel are aware of these types of loss, they are better able to provide helpful support to students. Appreciating and recognizing the range of losses a student might experience is a good first step. Ask specifically about these issues, or use what you already know about a student to offer support.

Learn more about secondary loss and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Even in Violent Communities, Children Don't "Get Used To Death"**

What happens to children who have experienced the death of a peer? What if they have gone through this multiple times? What if one or more family members have died?

These experiences are not uncommon in some communities. Children may know many people who have died violently. They may have seen bodies on the street as they walk to school. They may hear gunshots at night—or in the daytime.

Too often, adults assume children somehow become accustomed to these losses. The children and teens may not seem to react when they hear of another death. They may look like they don't care.

The truth is these experiences affect them deeply. Each death makes them more vulnerable to the impact of future loss. These cumulative losses accentuate the feelings of sadness, anxiety and stress they are having.

School personnel can help by providing opportunities for students to express themselves and be heard by concerned, caring and competent adults. While this is true in all settings, it is perhaps even more critical where students have experienced cumulative loss.

Learn more about cumulative loss and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

### **After a Death, More Losses Await**

When children lose a parent or other close family member, they mourn that person. Most school professionals understand and expect this. However, there are additional losses related to the death that can affect children deeply. These are often less familiar to school professionals.

The story below, about a young man whose plans for college were interrupted by a death in the family, illustrates some of the secondary losses that can face grieving children and teens.

*I was planning to go to an out-of-state college. I was really excited. I'd be the first person in my family to attend college.*

*And then my dad died of a heart attack. Totally unexpected. My family just sort of fell apart. My mom had this part-time job cleaning hotel rooms. There was no money. I had two little sisters at home.*

*I had to go to work full time. It was the only way we could survive. I barely finished high school. I thought I could pick up some classes at the community college, but there was no way. We were all so sad. My sisters and mom needed me. I had to be with them when I wasn't at work.*

If this young man had been your student, what could you have done to support him?

Learn more about secondary loss and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Support for Grieving Students: A Team Makes it Happen**

When a student experiences the death of a loved one, what should schools do? One essential step for a school supporting a grieving student is to work as a team in their efforts. Here's an example.

Fifth grader Elia's family was devastated when her older sister died in a car crash. Elia's school stepped up to give Elia and her family whatever support they could.

Her teacher touched base with the family right away, attended the funeral service, and made adjustments in Elia's coursework to ease her transition back to school. She also discussed the matter with Elia's classmates to help them offer appropriate support when the girl returned to class.

Elia's PE teacher and reading tutor were informed of the events. The principal encouraged everyone on staff to review content from the in-service on grieving students they had completed at the start of the year. The school counselor, school nurse and district psychologist were all ready to speak to Elia if she wished. A pediatrician in the community who was a bereavement specialist was also notified, and stood ready to help.

These education professionals were taking appropriate steps to support their student. But with some coordination and teamwork, the impact can be even greater. Here are some other things they can do:

- Have a team meeting to plan and coordinate support. Discuss each person's unique role and potential contributions.
- Choose a primary contact person for the family. Families may feel overwhelmed if they are contacted by many school staff.
- Choose a primary contact person (or two) to provide support for the student for both the near and longer term. This helps avoid a mistaken assumption on any issue that "someone else is taking care of this."

Learn about other steps teams can take to coordinate and plan their support at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Grieving Students and Transitions: Vulnerable Times**

Transitions are a normal part of growing up and participating in school life. Students move from one activity to another throughout the day. At the start of the school year, they transition to a new class. And in certain years, they graduate and transition to new schools.

These transitions are challenging for all students. They are likely to have new teachers and routines, new rules and schedules, and even new friends.

For students who have experienced the death of a loved one, the stress of transitions is often even more severe. The person who died may have been someone who provided valuable guidance—someone who is deeply missed at these vulnerable times.

“My mom knew what to say when things were hard or I was nervous about something.”

“My sister could always calm my family down. They all seem really crazy right now.”

“I’m sad that my dad doesn’t know who I am now that I’m older and more mature.”

### **Providing Support**

School teams can help grieving students at transitions between grades or during promotions to new schools. First, a team should get permission from the student and his or her family to talk with new teachers (in the same school), or administrators, teachers, counselors and school health staff (at a new school).

The team can communicate the student’s needs and strengths, as well as strategies that have been effective in providing support.

The student can be invited to check back in regularly with a school counselor, favorite teacher or coach for ongoing support and consistency during the time of transition.

Learn more about supporting grieving students through transitions at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **When Older Students Experience Grief: Special Concerns**

High school juniors and seniors often face special challenges when a family member or close friend dies.

After a death, difficulty concentrating and learning are common. Younger students may expect to catch up. Older students, coping with heightened academic demands and scrutiny, often fear they are falling irretrievably behind.

While most teens are ambivalent about separating from their families, grieving youth often become even more anxious about leaving friends and family behind. Will something happen to their loved ones? If they leave, will they ever see these people again? What if they need support themselves—who will help them deal with their own grief?

A plan to pursue education when the family is in need may feel selfish. Students may feel obligated to provide economic or emotional support to a parent who is also grieving.

### **What's the Right Course?**

What should older students do in these situations? Every student and family situation will be different. The most important thing school staff can do is help students explore carefully and honestly what is in their own and their family's best interests.

Involvement of a school counselor or other student support professional can be helpful for both student and family as they endeavor to explore these options in a careful, balanced way.

Learn more about supporting students experiencing grief at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.



## **Social Media and Grieving Children: Helpful or Harmful?**

Social media is a simple fact of student life today. The vast majority of teens spend time on social media sites, and many younger students do as well.

When a child has experienced the death of a family member or close friend, can social media be a good thing? Or is it more likely to cause distress and harm?

David Schonfeld, MD, Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, explains that, “The discussion is not whether grieving students *should* be using social media, or whether it is appropriate. Rather, it is how best to adapt to its use in this context, and in what ways it can be used optimally.”

### **Comfortable Space, Unique Opportunities**

Adults are sometimes uncomfortable with the use of social media, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. For most children and adolescents, however, social media is a familiar and comfortable way to communicate.

These formats—Facebook, Twitter, texting, Instagram, instant messaging and more—offer unique and even powerful ways children can gain support and check in with peers. In fact, many children dealing with bereavement choose these avenues as their preferred methods of communication.

Why?

*It’s familiar.* Young people communicate in these ways about all kinds of life events, including some that are quite serious.

*It offers control.* Grieving students can decide when to read and respond to a text, for example. They can monitor their reactions and only need to share what they choose to. They can opt to be more open and vulnerable with close friends, and a bit more distant with others. They can respond when they feel composed and ready to do so.

*Others may share more openly.* The sense of privacy users often feel with social media can allow classmates to share personal and sensitive responses they might not share as openly in an in-person setting.

### **Challenges and Cautions**

It is also important for grieving children to have face-to-face time with supportive peers and adults. Social media interactions will be most helpful when they are balanced with real-world contacts. Relying only on social media can increase the sense of social isolation grieving children may feel.

People may say hurtful or inappropriate things through social media. This might include peers or strangers who are able to see a post related to a grieving student’s loss. Grieving students may also come across disturbing news items online, about their own loss or other deaths.

Education professionals are one of the most important face-to-face contacts for grieving students. When talking with students, consider checking in about the kind of support they're getting (or not getting) in social media. Teachers might suggest parents of grieving students consider monitoring their children's social media feeds, or ask their children about the social media content on their sites.

Learn more about the benefits and pitfalls of social media and ways to offer support to students at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Social Media and School Response to a Death: Prepare Your School by Doing an Audit**

When the death of a student or school staff member occurs, schools will want to have a variety of policies in place—who at the school is notified first? How is the information confirmed? How are staff notified? Who determines what information is given to students?

An important area that may be overlooked is social media. Schools can become better prepared for such events by performing a social media audit.

### **Challenges**

Social media is an undeniable part of student and campus life. Here are some common experiences for schools today when a member of their school community dies.

- News of the death is communicated rapidly across the campus through texting and social media. Students often learn of a death before staff. Rumors and inaccurate information may spread. Teachers may find themselves responding to students' questions about a death without having the basic facts.
- News about real-time critical incidents may be communicated (e.g., a shooting in the community, the death of a police officer). These may involve students, family members or staff.
- Students on field trips may learn about a death before teachers and chaperones.
- Negative or hurtful comments may appear on Facebook pages or other social media sites. Vulnerable students may make references to suicidal thoughts.

### **Auditing Policies: Three Areas to Explore**

School policies concerning social media can be reviewed with an eye to how they can be crafted to best support grieving students. Three areas can be especially useful.

1. *Planning and implementation.* What are the goals of the school's social media efforts? How are they measured? How are staff and students offered education about social media use?

An informed and educated school community will understand what sorts of activities and comments are appropriate during times of hardship, such as when an individual or the school community is grieving.

2. *Policies.* What are staff and student responsibilities concerning social media? What are the standards of conduct? What are the responses to misconduct? How will social media be used in the event of a critical incident?

Preparing ahead can help support appropriate communications and prevent or limit inappropriate uses of social media.

3. *Monitoring*. How is the school monitoring social media references to itself and its students? How does the school monitor possible threats, risks or harassment among students? What special steps are taken during and after a loss or critical incident?

Having standards and practices in place can better guide responses after the death of a member of the school community. This is helpful for all students, including a student who has lost a loved one or vulnerable students who may be at greater emotional risk.

Learn more about ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Offer Positive Guidance to Grieving Students about Social Media**

Social media is a simple fact of student life today. The vast majority of teens spend time on social media sites, and many younger students do as well. Grieving students frequently communicate with peers through texting and social media. There are good reasons for this.

*It's familiar.* Young people communicate in these ways about all kinds of life events, including some that are quite serious. They're used to it.

*It's simpler.* A student can communicate broadly and immediately with a large group of friends and acquaintances. There's no need to contact everyone individually and go through the pain of telling the story over and over again.

*It offers control.* Grieving students can decide when to read and respond to someone's post or text. They can compose themselves, think things through and respond when they're ready.

### **Educators: Offer Support and Guidance**

Grieving children also need face-to-face time with supportive peers and adults. Social media interactions will be most helpful when they are balanced with real-world contacts.

Education professionals are one of the most important face-to-face contacts for grieving students. When talking with students, look for opportunities to ask specifically about the kind of support they're getting (or not getting) through texting or social media.

Begin by expressing your condolences and checking in generally on how they're doing. As the conversation continues, or in a subsequent conversation, you might ask questions such as these:

- Have you posted about your loss on Facebook? How did that go?
- What have you heard from your friends? Are they texting you or posting on your Facebook page?
- Sometimes, people who go through an experience like the death of a family member see things on social media that help them cope with their sad feelings. Sometimes they see things that are hurtful or troublesome. I'm wondering what sorts of things you've been seeing.

If students are experiencing troublesome posts or harassment, help them problem-solve. You may want to link them with technical support to block negative posts. In some situations, counseling support for the student or disciplinary action against offenders may be called for.

Learn more about ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

**For Grieving Students:  
Keep Academic Challenges from Becoming Academic Failures**

A common reaction to grief is difficulty concentrating. Grieving children and teens usually find it hard to remember new facts or master new concepts.

Educators should anticipate these sorts of academic challenges for grieving students. Teachers and other staff can modify lessons in ways that are tremendously helpful. This might include changing the focus of an assignment, coming up with a different way to complete an assignment or postponing a due date.

It's important to offer academic support proactively. You don't need to wait for a grieving student to begin demonstrating academic challenges. Early support from teachers and schools can prevent academic challenges from becoming academic failures.

Learn more about the impact of grief on learning and ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Difficulty Concentrating: A Hallmark of Grief**

Difficulty with concentration and learning are extremely common for people dealing with grief. This is true for adults as well as children. However, because learning is the *main* work of school-aged children and teens, these common challenges pose a risk for more serious academic problems.

As one grieving student explained, “It was hard because I couldn’t concentrate on my work. If I was reading, I would read the words, but I wouldn’t read the story. I would think about something else and I couldn’t concentrate.”

This reflects many of the typical experiences for grieving students. They are usually easily distracted. They have more difficulty learning new facts or concepts. Preexisting learning challenges often become worse.

The goal for educators is to find a balance between maintaining reasonable expectations and providing the support and accommodation students need. Educators can talk directly with students to identify the level of academic work that feels appropriate and achievable. It’s also a good idea to talk with families to learn more about how the student is adjusting at home.

Three steps educators can take to modify learning activities for grieving students include:

1. *Change an assignment.* This can include changing a due date or changing the format (for example, writing a personal essay instead of giving an oral presentation to the class). It might mean allowing a student to work with a partner instead of alone.
2. *Change the focus or timing of a lesson.* Sometimes the content of a lesson can pose problems. A literature class might choose a different book to discuss if the one originally scheduled describes a death similar to the one a student is currently grieving. A health class might postpone the unit on substance abuse until later in the year if a student has just lost a sibling to a drug overdose.
3. *Reschedule or adapt tests.* Tests create considerable pressure for a grieving student who is unable to concentrate. Immediately after a death, such students might be exempted from a test. They might be able to delay a test or take a test without the usual time limit. Test scores might be weighted less in determining final grades.

Learn more about the impact of grief on learning and ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Anticipate Challenges to Learning Among Grieving Students**

It is common for children and teens to experience academic challenges after the death of a family member or close friend. Educators should expect this. Lessons and assignments can be adapted in ways that help students cope more successfully.

These efforts provide support for both the grief process generally and any struggles a student may be having with learning. By offering this support proactively, educators can help prevent academic challenges from becoming academic failures.

Typical experiences for grieving students include:

- Difficulty concentrating and distractibility
- Difficulty remembering new facts and concepts
- Anxiety, sadness and trouble sleeping—all of which contribute further to learning difficulties

Some of the modifications teachers have found helpful in their work with grieving students include:

- Being flexible with due dates and accepting late assignments
- Offering to help a student complete an assignment
- Providing alternatives for a written or timed test (testing at a later time, testing in a private setting, testing without a time limit, doing a different kind of assignment altogether)
- Allowing a student to work with a partner rather than solo
- Adapting an assignment so it is more engaging for the student (for example, instead of a formal research paper, offering the option of completing an oral history project)

Learn more about the impact of grief on learning and ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.



## **Guilt, Shame and Grief: Understand Common Reactions in Students**

When a child experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, feelings of guilt and shame are common. School professionals who understand why these reactions occur can take steps to support students. Often, speaking directly to children and normalizing these feelings are important first steps in helping children adjust to a loss.

Children sometimes feel responsible for bad things that happen to people around them. They feel guilty because they assume their thoughts, feelings and actions are influencing larger events.

Children may believe an argument or conflict, a moment of anger or a negative thought had the real consequence of bringing about someone's death. This is even more likely when a relationship was ambivalent or conflicted—with an absent or abusive parent, for example.

After a death, such thoughts are common even for adolescents.

Children may also get the impression it is wrong to ask questions about a death. They see the discomfort it causes adults. They may observe feelings of unease in their family especially when a death involves stigma in some way—for example, a death related to drug overdose, criminal behavior, suicide or HIV. These experiences can bring up shame for children—about their own curiosity, “naughty” behaviors they think might have contributed in some way to the death, or something “bad” done by the person who died.

It is helpful to discuss guilt and shame explicitly with grieving children and teens. Ask about thoughts, feelings or questions they have been having. Describe the kinds of reactions related to guilt and shame others often have. Offer reassurance, and consider referrals to counseling for students who continue to be troubled by guilt and shame over time.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **These 2 Steps Can Help Grieving Children Deal with Guilt and Shame**

When a child or teen experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, shame and guilt are common reactions. After a death, they may worry that their own thoughts, feelings and actions helped caused it. This can bring up feelings of guilt.

Children may also sense there is something wrong in wishing to discuss or having questions about a death. They see the pain and discomfort their questions cause the adults around them. They may feel ashamed about their own curiosity or worry that “naughty” behaviors might have contributed in some way to the death. They may feel shame about something “bad” they hear about the person who died.

Education professionals can take two important steps to help grieving children deal with guilt and shame.

First, create a safe environment for children to honestly disclose the thoughts and feelings they are having. Ask directly if they ever worry that the death might have been their fault in some way.

Second, normalize these reactions. Let them know that it is very common for children and even adults to worry about these things after someone they care about has died. Encourage them to talk with you about these thoughts and ideas over time.

Often, being able to speak about these things helps children adjust to the loss. If, over time, the guilt and shame do not seem to improve or appear to worsen, a referral to counseling may be appropriate.

This is especially true when there might be some logical reason for a child to feel he or she has contributed to a death. For example, a teen might have had a big fight with a parent, who then drove away in a distracted frame of mind and was involved in a fatal car crash. A child might have dared a friend or younger sibling to take some risky action that resulted in death.

Learn more about children’s experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Grieving Students: Why Children Feel Guilty After a Death**

When a child or teen experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, they may worry that their own thoughts, feelings and actions helped cause it.

Children may say such things as:

- I forgot to check in with my mom after school and then she died. If I'd checked on her, she would have been okay.
- I kind of cheated on a test. That was bad. And then my classmate died. I think it's my fault.
- My dad and I had a big fight and he stormed out of the house. Then he was in a car crash. I think it's because he was so mad at me.
- My grandma was sick for a long time. I kept thinking, "It will just be easier for everyone when she dies." I shouldn't have thought that. Because then she did die.

Even adults have these kinds of thoughts. We have the sense that if we can just identify how we contributed to a loved one's death, we can take steps to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else we care about. Of course, part of adjusting to a death is recognizing that we have limited influence over such events.

When education professionals talk to grieving students, it's important to create a safe environment where they can disclose these kinds of troubling thoughts and feelings. It's often helpful to ask directly, "Do you ever worry that something you thought, said or did contributed to this death?"

Provide information that normalizes such reactions. Let students know that children and adults alike often struggle with what they might have done differently to protect someone who died. The ability to speak honestly about such reactions helps children take first steps in adjusting to a loss.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Grieving Children's Reactions Sometimes Confuse Adults**

Children's reactions to the death of a loved one vary greatly. Adults are sometimes confused if a grieving child doesn't behave as expected. Sometimes children appear happy and play as usual. Sometimes they say angry or unkind things about the person who died.

It's important to understand that after the death of someone close, children will be experiencing deep and powerful emotions, even if this is not at first clear from the things they say and do.

For example, children may appear calm and unemotional on the surface because they are working to keep their powerful feelings hidden from others. They may express anger and resentment because the loss leaves them feeling anxious and out of control. They may act out and take risks in an effort to master new feelings of personal vulnerability. They may regress and act like a younger child in an effort to gain attention and be comforted.

Education professionals can take steps to let children know they care, want to listen and are willing to help. Here are some good ways to start:

1. Ask grieving children what they are feeling. Check in regularly and invite them to talk about what's going on in their lives.
2. Observe and listen. Rather than directly interpreting children's behaviors, comments or creative work, ask them to describe what they mean or what they have created and what it means to them.
3. Normalize the emotional experiences of grief. It can be helpful for children to understand that it's common to feel strong emotions after a death. Let them know that over time, these feelings usually become less powerful, and that talking about them often helps in this process.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

**“His mom died and he didn’t even look sad”—  
Understanding Children’s Reactions to Death**

Reactions to death vary greatly in children. Some students appear to have little or no reaction at all after the death of someone important in their lives.

This does not mean they are not greatly affected by the death, however. Reese, an elementary student, put it this way:

“Emotions really affect me a lot, so I just don’t talk about it a lot. I just keep it in my body sometimes. It’s hard. I do different ways to just keep it in and not out.”

This eloquently describes the experience of many grieving children. They make an extraordinary effort to keep their emotions hidden from others.

These children may not trust themselves to control their feelings—they would be embarrassed if they began to cry at school. They may be uncomfortable about appearing emotional or needy in front of peers. They may have sensed discomfort from family, teachers and classmates when they did express strong feelings, and be hiding their feelings to protect others.

Sometimes children don’t understand themselves why they are keeping their emotions hidden.

Conversations, check-ins and invitations to ask questions or discuss feelings can be helpful for any student experiencing grief, regardless of how he or she appears to be coping.

Learn more about children’s experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Writing, Art and Play: Non-Verbal Ways to Support Grieving Children**

Many children and teens express their feelings in ways other than talking. Very young children often work through their feelings during play. Older children may use creative activities such as writing, music and art to express their thoughts and feelings.

It's helpful to offer grieving children opportunities to participate in such activities. These creative endeavors can provide important clues to their thoughts and feelings. However, it's important not to jump to conclusions about what these activities mean.

For example, sometimes a child draws only happy pictures after a traumatic loss. Adults might think, "This child has adjusted well, or has not been deeply affected by these events." In fact, it's more likely such children are giving a sign they are not yet ready to process or express their thoughts and feelings about the death.

This is why it's a good idea to ask children to describe what their work is about or what story they are telling. This will often invite more open and honest conversation, especially if you are able to offer this kind of check-in repeatedly over time.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## Supporting Grieving Children: What to Know About Grief Triggers

*Grief triggers* are sudden reminders of a person who has died. They elicit powerful emotional responses in grieving children. They are especially common in the first few months after a death, but may occur at any time.

Here are three helpful things to know.

*1. Grief triggers can be intense and unsettling for students.* The sudden reminder and strong reaction are unexpected. The student hasn't prepared for the flood of powerful emotions that occurs. Students may feel frightened or out of control. They may think they are losing ground after starting to feel some relief from their grief. Their reactions—perhaps tears, anger or a need to escape—may embarrass them.

*2. Informed school professionals can support students who experience grief triggers.* It helps to explain ahead of time that such reactions may occur. Let students know that, while intense, the immediate experience will pass.

Collaborate with the student to develop a plan for grief triggers. This often includes identifying a safe place the student can go (library, nurse's office, counseling office, study hall). Work out a special signal that doesn't draw the attention of the entire class but does allow the student to go to that safe space when necessary. You might invite the student to call a family member or arrange support from a counselor or school nurse.

*3. You can anticipate some likely triggers and take steps to minimize them.* Triggers often occur around holidays or anniversaries (Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, anniversary of the death). Reach out to grieving students at these times.

Introduce activities or discussions in ways that acknowledge absences and offer alternatives. For a Father's Day activity, invite students to focus on their father or another important male adult in their lives. For discussions about serious illness, violence or accidental death, recognize that students may have lost family members or close friends in these ways.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Support Grieving Students: Use These 7 Steps to Respond to Grief Triggers**

*Grief triggers following a loss* are sudden reminders about the person who has died. They elicit powerful emotional responses in grieving children. They are especially common in the first few months after a death, but may occur at any time.

Common triggers include such things as hearing a song or watching a TV show, seeing a picture of a place, a smell or sound, special occasions, offhand comments by peers or even a news report about someone who died in a similar fashion.

Children experiencing a grief trigger may respond in many ways. There may be an outburst of anger or sadness, intense crying or feelings of being out of control. They may be unable to concentrate or feel a need to escape a situation. They may feel embarrassed that they can't manage their emotions.

Here are seven ways education professionals can anticipate, respond to and minimize triggers for grieving children.

1. Speak to grieving children ahead of time about these incidents if possible. Tell them they are fairly common, can be quite intense, and do pass.
2. Identify a safe space or location the student can go. This might be the library, a study hall, the counselor's or nurse's office, or some other place at the school.
3. Identify an adult the student can talk to when feeling upset or wishing to talk.
4. Come up with a plan that allows the student to discretely leave the classroom or to request and obtain support that doesn't draw attention. This might be a low-key signal (a wave of the hand, a trip to the tissue box). Otherwise, students may hesitate to seek permission to leave the classroom or to ask for help. It's difficult to expose their vulnerabilities in front of peers, especially if they are already feeling overwhelmed.
5. Allow the student to call a parent or family member if he or she feels it would help.
6. Encourage the student to speak with a school counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker.
7. Offer the student a chance to talk with you privately about feelings, questions or other concerns.

When students know these types of plans are in place, they feel less trapped when triggers do occur. This helps children remain in class and be more available for learning.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.



## **Support Grieving Children: Frame Lessons in Ways That Minimize Grief Triggers**

*Grief triggers* are sudden reminders of a person who has died. They elicit powerful emotional responses in grieving children. They are especially common in the first few months after a death, but may occur at any time.

Virtually every classroom includes children who have experienced the death of a parent, other family member or close friend. Teachers can't possibly know everything that has happened in the lives of their students. Yet bringing this understanding to the way they plan and introduce lessons can offer valuable support to grieving children.

It can also minimize grief triggers by preparing students ahead of time for what's coming and offering some options.

Here's how one teacher explained it:

*I did a lesson on St. Valentine's Day having students write a letter to a parent to say, "Thank you." And then I learned that some of our kids don't live with their parents for whatever reason—either they're passed away or they're just not around.*

*I had to learn about my students outside of school. That made me re-edit my curriculum. Not take it out, but address it differently in terms of family being whoever is next to you, whoever takes care of you at that time.*

Teachers can introduce family-focused activities with choices for students (e.g., cards for Mother's Day, bookmarks for Father's Day, describing a tradition for Thanksgiving). For example, a teacher might say, "If your father is no longer alive or doesn't live with you currently, you can still focus on your father or select another important male in your life—someone who cares for you and has given you support." Or, "I'd like you to describe a Thanksgiving tradition in your own family, or one you've heard or read about in other families, that you believe brings families closer together."

Teachers can also present emotion-based writing activities (e.g., write about a sad day, a happy event, something that scared you) with different options. "It doesn't need to be the saddest day ever, just a day that was sad." "If you don't want to write about a sad day, write about another day that was important to you."

Teachers can also openly acknowledge students' range of experience. For example, when starting on subjects addressing serious illness, war, or accidental or violent death, mention that some students in class may have had family members or friends who died in this way. Encourage everyone in class to speak thoughtfully about the topic. Avoid putting any students on the spot in the discussion.

Steps such as these can help students remain emotionally present in class and be more available for learning.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Back to School: Remember That Transitions Can Be Tough for Grieving Students**

Summer break is ending. Students are returning to school with a range of feelings and reactions. Some are delighted to be back in the social world of friends. Others are apprehensive about their upcoming classes. Some are excited to mark one more step forward as they grow and mature, especially if they're moving up to middle or high school.

In all of the bustle of the year's start, one group that can easily be overlooked is students who are grieving the loss of a parent, sibling or other close family member or friend. Most education professionals would expect children with a recent loss to face some challenges in their academic focus. However, the ongoing experience of grief is often less recognized.

Here are three key features to remember about grief over time for children and teens.

1. *Grief proceeds on its own terms.* Grief does not end at a fixed point. In many ways, children never get over a significant loss. It is a life-changing event.
2. *As children grow and develop, normal transitions and changes in their lives will remind them of their loss.* A boy in elementary school whose father died may miss him acutely years later as he enters puberty. A girl navigating the new social intricacies of high school may wish more than ever for the guidance and advice of her mother who died several years prior. As grieving children see peers enjoying support from families, they may feel their loss deeply, even years after the death occurred.
3. *As children develop, they become more capable of understanding and adjusting to their loss.* As time passes, the work of grieving becomes less difficult and requires less energy. It begins as a full-time job, but becomes more of a part-time effort that allows other meaningful experiences to occur. Grieving lasts a lifetime, but it does not need to consume a life.

### **An Ideal Time to Make a Difference**

The beginning of the school year is an ideal juncture for education professionals to remind themselves of steps that can help recognize and support grieving students over time.

1. *Teach about death and grief.* Use developmentally appropriate lessons about death and grief to normalize the experience of grief for all students. Talk about losses that have impacted the community. Such lessons and discussions also help peers understand how to offer appropriate support to grieving students.
2. *Offer options for family activities.* Many students do not have a parent to turn to for family-based homework activities. This can be due to death, divorce, military deployment, a parent in prison, mental illness in a parent or other reasons. Always offer options—"Talk to your parent or another adult you know and trust. If you'd like any help identifying someone to talk to for this assignment, please see me."
3. *Recognize that grieving children are often more vulnerable at times of transition.* This can be the start of the school year (new teachers, new classmates, new classroom). It can involve a change in schools or a change in the family—someone moving in or out. It can include the changes of puberty, the start of dating or a breakup with a romantic partner. If you've been working with a grieving student who is transitioning to a new school, ask

the student and parents if they would like you to notify the new school of the circumstances. Often, this creates a safer and more welcoming setting for the student. Families may appreciate being relieved of the need to contact the new school about the student's situation.

If you learn that one of your new students has experienced a death, reach out early in the year. Acknowledge that this can sometimes create challenges for students and let the student know you're available to talk, or listen, if any concerns arise.

4. Support high school juniors and seniors in their college and career aspirations. After a death, teens may hesitate to move forward with plans to go to college, join the military or attend a trade school. They may feel the family needs them nearby. Sometimes they are expected to contribute financially to the family. While there is no single "correct" solution in these situations, the support of a trusted teacher or other school professional who can listen to a student's concerns can be invaluable.

When educators make the effort to be available to grieving students in these ways, they have the opportunity to experience some of the most rewarding moments within their profession.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Commemorating a Death: Stories from Three Educators**

When a student, teacher or other member of the school community dies, the wish to commemorate the death is natural. Memorial and commemorative activities help students express and cope with difficult feelings. Students can communicate at a public level their connection and attachment to the person who died. They can draw on support of peers and adults and begin to find meaning in the loss.

Here are stories from three educators who faced unique situations involving death and came up with distinct and effective responses.

### *Remembering Her Father*

A young girl's father died. Her classmates had all known him from when he volunteered in class. The girl's teacher had the students draw pictures and write out something they remembered about him—that he helped carry one across the snow, that he opened another's juice.

The girl felt better after looking through the pictures. "Now I know," she told her mother, "that I'm not the only one who misses him."

### *Competing Efforts*

A high school student died late in the week. Over the weekend, different groups of students developed distinct ideas and plans for commemorating him. These well-intentioned but competing efforts needed to be worked out. The principal asked the student body president—a student with good "social capital"—to speak with the different groups. She was able to work with them to develop a unified plan.

### *A Day of Service*

After an event where a number of people were killed or injured, a superintendent met with students to see how they wanted to commemorate the victims. The students chose a morning moment of silence, followed by a day of voluntary service in their community.

What sorts of memorialization have you experienced in your settings? Are you familiar with the guidelines that help schools create the kind of commemorative events that are most likely to offer constructive, meaningful support to students?

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* (of which our organization is a member) offers more information and guidance about memorialization and commemoration. The materials at their website ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) are designed specifically for school professionals.

## **Grief Over the Holidays: Educators Can Help Students Cope**

All across the nation, the December holidays are a special time for families, schools and communities. Everywhere we look, we see signs of celebration. In schools, there may be pageants, food drives, decorations and parties. In stores, we hear familiar music. On the streets, people wish each other happy holidays.

During these times, most of us also think about people we miss, including loved ones who have died. These memories can be especially acute for children and teens who have lost a loved one. They may experience periods of deep sadness, a renewal of their grief, or sudden and unexpected reactions of anger, despair or fear.

These responses may happen the first or second year after a death, or many years later. Educators spend a lot of time with students and are uniquely poised to observe grief responses over time. They can take steps to anticipate challenges. The support and understanding they offer grieving students over the holidays can be especially helpful.

### **Grief Triggers Can Be Strong**

Grief triggers are sudden reminders of the person who died that cause powerful emotional responses. These can include smells or sounds, hearing a song, participating in a family tradition, or even imagining a lost opportunity such as a holiday dinner with the loved one.

Our holidays are filled with these kinds of reminders, so grief triggers can be frequent and quite strong during these times.

### **Emotions Can Be Powerful**

Grieving children may feel particularly vulnerable when they have grief responses to holiday events. They may isolate themselves from peers or celebrations in an effort to avoid triggers. They may be frustrated or disappointed that they can't manage these responses. It's common for children to feel, "I should be past this and able to stay in control now."

### **Goals for Educators**

By reaching out to grieving students, educators have an opportunity to promote several important goals, including:

1. *Decreasing students' sense of isolation.* It's common for grieving children to feel that others do not understand their experience.
2. *Offering students an opportunity to talk.* Students *will* be thinking about their loved one. They will be reflecting on memories, experiences and feelings.
3. *Encouraging students to talk with others.* In most cases, it is helpful for students to talk honestly with peers and family about their thoughts, feelings and memories.

### **Steps to Take**

- *Ask open-ended questions.* Listen more than talk. For example, ask, “How are the holidays going for you? I wonder what thoughts you’ve been having about your dad lately.”
- *Accept expressions of emotion.* Students may express sadness, pain, frustration, anger or other powerful emotions. Avoid minimizing students’ feelings or trying to put a “positive” spin on their expressions. For example, saying, “It’s important to focus on the good times you had with your dad,” is likely to communicate that you don’t want to hear a student talk about painful things.
- *Reach out to grieving students at school events.* The absence of a loved one may be especially noticeable during the classroom party or holiday band concert. Make a point to touch base in some way. Let a student know you’re happy to see her here at the party, or are looking forward to hearing her play in the concert.
- *Introduce class activities in a way that acknowledges absences and offers alternatives.* For example, if students are making cards for members of their family, invite them, if they wish, to also include cards for someone who is no longer living, or who does not live with the family.
- *Lead class discussions about holiday stories and experiences with sensitivity.* Poems, stories and discussions may present triggers for grieving students. Open up the possibility during discussions (“Sometimes people have sad reactions to the holidays because they miss people. Have any of you ever had an experience like this?”). Consider reaching out after class to see how a grieving student is doing, or learn what he or she thought of the discussion.

Children experience grief differently over time. What is true this year for the holidays may not be the same next year. This is why one of the most important things educators can do is ask questions and then listen, with presence and patience.

Learn more about ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Remembrance & Bereavement on Memorial Day: Supporting Children**

Memorial Day honors and remembers those who have served in our military. We bring special attention to those who have died in the line of duty, and the families who remember and miss them.

This is an opportune time for school professionals to think about providing support to children who have lost a parent, sibling or other close family member serving in the military. These children will be thinking of their loved one, even if the death occurred some time ago. So will children with a parent going through a long or repeat deployment, or families watching a loved one recovering from a serious emotional and/or physical combat injury.

In most ways, the process of grief and remembrance will be similar to that of children who have lost loved ones in other ways. The website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) provides guidance geared specifically to school professionals on how to offer support.

### **Ready to Protect**

It is understood that service members stand ready to protect our nation, whatever the risk. Combat deaths are often seen as heroic and noble. Children and families believe they are expected to respond to a loved one's combat death with strength, courage and grace.

Often, however, children feel confusion, anger, resentment and other difficult emotions. "Why did my dad have to die serving his country? I want him here with me!" "Why couldn't someone else have died? I want my mom back."

Children may feel guilt or shame about these reactions. They may be unable to express the painful and complex emotions they're having. They may believe they should curtail their emotions. This interferes with their ability to fully experience their grief and, over time, move forward in their lives.

### **Support Grieving Children**

School professionals can take steps to support children who have lost a family member in combat.

1. *Touch base.* As Memorial Day approaches, let children in military families or those who have lost a loved one in combat know you're thinking of them. Ask how they're doing. (See modules at the Coalition's website on [Talking With Children](#) and [What Not to Say](#).)
2. *Create a supportive culture among peers.* Take steps proactively to help students understand and talk about death. Offer guidance on how to support a peer who has experienced a loss. (See the module on [Peer Support](#).)
3. *Support children in their process of bereavement.* Ask them to share memories of their loved one or talk about the deceased's positive traits and behaviors. Ask about positive traits



they share. Have them describe friends and family who have been supportive. (See the module on *Providing Support Over Time.*)

Providing support for children and families in these ways is one of the most meaningful ways for school professionals to support children and remember those who served our country.

## Father's Day May Not Be Easy for Some Students

For school programs that extend into the summer months, Father's Day is often a day to celebrate. Students might make cards, write stories or perform plays. Some invite their fathers to school for special programs marking the importance of fathers in children's lives.

For a child whose father is absent, however, these celebrations can be confusing and even painful. This can include a surprising number of students. A father may have died. He may live in another state or town. He may be deployed in the military. He may be in prison. Some fathers' whereabouts are unknown to their children.

### The First Father's Day

The first Father's Day, ironically, was organized on July 5, 1908, by a woman named Grace Golden Clayton. The previous December, her own father had been killed in West Virginia's Monongah Mining Disaster—one of 361 lives lost that day. Of the men killed, 250 had been fathers. About a thousand children in the community were left fatherless.

Grace Clayton wanted to honor the memory of all of those fathers and share her grief with other families who had lost loved ones.

### Today's Father's Day

Father's Day is a very different kind of event today, celebrating living fathers and their value in our own lives. It makes sense to affirm the importance of positive male role models for students. Using a few simple steps, educators can present Father's Day activities in ways that are less likely to be troubling or traumatizing for those children who do not have fathers engaged in their lives.

1. *Expect that these activities might trigger feelings of confusion or grief.* It is not difficult to imagine such reactions for children who have experienced the death of their father. However, such activities might also be troubling for children who have lost other important male figures in their lives—uncles, grandfathers, neighbors. Even children who have gone through the death of a sibling, mother or close family friend might be reminded of ways the family has changed since the death.
2. *Frame activities in broad, flexible ways.* Acknowledge the possibility that fathers may be absent. For example, you might say, "For this Father's Day activity, I'd like you to focus on your father or another important male adult in your life—someone who cares for you and has provided support. If your father is not living, or he does not live with you, you can still complete this activity with him in mind if you wish."
3. *Reach out to grieving students ahead of time if possible.* If you know a student has gone through a loss in the family, speak privately before the activity. Describe what you plan to do. Then ask if the student feels comfortable with this activity or would like to do something else.
4. *Be sensitive to students' responses during the activity.* Watch for students who show signs of discomfort or distress. Check in to see if they would like to adapt the activity in some way (e.g., making a card for their mother, a helpful neighbor, or their best friend). Avoid calling on these students during discussions, but allow them to volunteer to speak if they wish.

These are also useful adaptations for activities on other holidays that focus on family connections—Mother’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Thanksgiving and more. Offer students options suitable to their range of life experiences.

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) hosts a website with videos and downloadable modules providing more information about students and grief. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **For Mother’s Day, Being Thoughtful in a Different Way Can Help Support Students**

Mother’s Day offers a rich array of choices for classroom educators. Run an internet search on “Mother’s Day classroom activities” and literally hundreds of ideas appear—quizzes, art projects, research, math and that longtime standby, making cards for Mom.

These can be fun endeavors for students and teachers alike. But a classroom activity focusing on mothers can be challenging for a student whose mother has died. It can also be difficult for students who don’t live with their mothers. Lesson plans posted on the internet rarely take note of this.

Amber Serfling, a special education teacher at King Learning Center in Deer River, MN, is an educator who *has* taken note. “I work with seven students, and three of them currently live with their mothers,” she explains. Her other students live with family members or in kinship care.

Ms. Serfling has learned to make small extra efforts in lesson planning that have had generous positive returns. “Teachers don’t want to introduce lessons that trouble or traumatize our students. I’ve found that if I just bring some mindfulness as I plan, it’s easy enough to accommodate the different experiences in my students’ lives.”

For example, last year she found a Mother’s Day activity she liked on a Pinterest board. The activity suggested teachers create a colorful backdrop that said, “Mom, I love you because…” Students could write out a message completing the statement, the teacher could take a photo of the student with the message, and students could make cards with their photos.

According to Ms. Serfling, “My students loved this activity. And the only accommodation I made was not including the word ‘Mom’ on the backdrop. We talked about Mother’s Day as a day of appreciation for those who help us most—someone who is always there for us. I told students that didn’t need to be a mom.”

Her students wrote messages to a range of people who have supported them. The class framed their photos and then gave them to the person they’d chosen.

In any class, there is a reasonable chance that one or more students will have lost a parent. In fact, 1 in 20 students will experience the death of a parent by the time they complete their schooling. Parents may be absent for other reasons as well—military service, incarceration, abandonment, long-distance work situations.

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students encourages educators to consider adapting not only Mother’s Day projects, but activities at other holidays that focus on family connections—Father’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Thanksgiving and more. Offer students options suitable to their range of life experiences.

Instead of making a card for their dads on Father’s Day, for example, students can make a card for an adult who has supported them in an important way.

Instead of drawing a picture of what their family did for Thanksgiving last year (some families might not have celebrated the holiday), students can draw a picture of a family celebration they’ve enjoyed, or one they would like to attend.

When teachers know a student has lost a parent, they might want to speak privately before activities that focus on parents or families. Together, they can work out an option that is comfortable for the student—perhaps shifting the focus of the activity, as Ms. Serfling did, or offering another activity for that student.

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) hosts a website with videos and downloadable modules providing more information about students and grief. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **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* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a Coalition member.

### Quiz: Are You Ready to Support Grieving Students?

How important is it for school professionals to offer support to students who've experienced the death of a family member or close friend? How can school staff learn what steps to take? Take this quiz to find out.

1. About how many children in the U.S. will experience the death of a parent by age 16?
  - a. 1 in 200
  - b. 1 in 50
  - c. 1 in 20
2. About how many children will experience the death of a family member, close friend or teacher by the time they finish high school?
  - a. 3 in 10
  - b. 5 in 10
  - c. 9 in 10
3. Common school-related challenges that face grieving students include:
  - a. *Teasing from peers*
  - b. *Difficulty concentrating and limitations in learning*
  - c. *Grief triggers—sudden, unexpected reminders of the person who died, accompanied by powerful emotional reactions*
  - d. *All of the above*
4. School professionals have a unique and vital role to play in supporting grieving students.
  - a. *True*
  - b. *False*
5. Most school professionals want to provide appropriate support to grieving students but feel they have insufficient training to do so.
  - a. *True*
  - b. *False*
6. The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* offers a number of free learning modules for school professionals that build skills for supporting grieving students.
  - a. *True!*

Answers:

1. C. About 5% of children in the U.S. will lose a parent by age 16.
2. C. About 90% of children in the U.S. will experience the death of someone significant in their life by the time they finish high school.
3. D. All of the above.
4. A. True. School professionals play a unique role in the lives of children. They know their students well. They observe behaviors at school that families may not see at home. When a death occurs, school staff usually have some distance from the loss. This often allows students to speak more frankly about their thoughts and feelings with teachers and other staff. They will not feel the need to protect a teacher in the same way they might want to protect a parent or sibling.



5. A. True. In a recent survey of 1,200 members of the American Federation of Teachers, respondents recognized the unique and important role they can play in these situations and wanted to offer support to grieving students. But 93% reported never receiving any training on this topic.
6. A. True. School professionals who want to know more about supporting grieving children are invited to visit the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member.

## Preparing School Professionals: Support for Grieving Students

Most school professionals have never had professional development addressing support for grieving students. Here's what some of your colleagues have said about this:

*“There was no training for loss or tragedy in my principalship training. I always felt as if it was something that was really needed.”*

- Principal

*“In all the years I've been a teacher, I can't specifically remember any training about dealing with loss and death. I think it's something we should be getting more training in.”*

- Teacher

*“I'm not aware of any bereavement training for teachers, but I think that it's important. There should be training for teachers.”*

- School Psychologist

In fact, in many schools, when training addressing death and bereavement does occur, it is hastily planned and delivered in a moment of crisis—a student or teacher has died, a critical incident involving a death has occurred on or near campus, a tragedy has occurred in the community.

But even before a crisis occurs, grieving students are present in nearly every classroom. By age 16, 1 in 20 students will experience the death of a parent. By high school graduation, 90% will have lost a family member or other significant person. These students typically face some learning and social challenges as a natural part of the grieving process. They will benefit from support that only school staff can offer.

In addition, non-affected peers will benefit from education about death, grief and ways to support a grieving classmate.

Teachers and school staff often hesitate to offer this kind of support. They worry that they will say or do the “wrong” thing and make matters worse. They don't want to start a discussion they don't know how to finish.

Fortunately, there are helpful resources that can guide school professionals in personal learning or professional development efforts. These include the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)), with a wide range of free modules on the topic, and the book [The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide](#).

When schools meet the challenge by providing inservice trainings on children and grief, they can:

- Emphasize that supporting grieving students is important
- Establish norms about what staff can and should do to support grieving children and their families
- Provide vital training to school personnel and establish that these are valued skills for them to acquire

- Demonstrate that the school administration is sensitive to teachers' needs and committed to supporting them in these efforts

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Supporting Grieving Students? Take Care of Yourself, Too**

Have you taken steps to support grieving students and their families? If you have, you've offered them some of the most meaningful and lasting support they will ever experience. Having an impact such as this is exactly why many school professionals choose to work in education.

However, this kind of effort can also be challenging. As one teacher said, "It can be difficult to talk with children about a death and see how sad they are."

Offering grief support can trigger a range of reactions in adults, including:

- Revisiting a past, personal experience of grief.
- Feeling more anxious about your own health and mortality.
- Increasing worries about a friend or family member who is ill.
- Feeling resentful or uncomfortable about the feelings that arise, then feeling guilty or inadequate for not "managing" your emotions more effectively.

These kinds of reactions are common. It's important to talk with other adults about any troublesome feelings that might arise. Friends, family and colleagues can be helpful. There may also be times when the support of a bereavement specialist or mental health professional will be appropriate.

You can learn more about strategies for professional self-care at the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* website: [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **“Quite Often, They Are Worn Thin”: When School Professional Support Grieving Students**

Offering support to grieving students and their families can be highly gratifying for school professionals. They are offering much-needed support during a critical time in a student’s life. The unique relationships children have with educators make these efforts immeasurably important.

But the impact on school professionals can be challenging, too. Grief is difficult to witness, and the grief of a child can be especially unsettling. It can be difficult to accept that it is not possible to prevent deep feelings of pain for a child who has lost a loved one.

Educators may find their own past personal experiences of loss are triggered by a student’s grief. They may find themselves feeling new worries about the severity of an illness in their own life—could it become more severe? They may be concerned about a friend or family member. They may experience new apprehension about their own or others’ mortality. “They are worn thin,” one assistant principal explained.

Sometimes, school professionals find they are uncomfortable with the role of providing support for grieving children. They may feel unprepared or have too many other stressful experiences in their lives at the moment. This can lead to feelings of guilt for “not doing better,” or a sense of insufficiency for not being more prepared.

These are fairly common reactions. In some cases, it may be best for an educator to turn to someone else on the team—a school counselor, psychologist, social worker, or nurse; administrator; or teacher—to step into the role of offering support.

It is important for educators to get support themselves when they are interacting with grieving students. Talking with friends, family and colleagues is usually helpful. Sometimes, it is also useful to speak with a mental health professional, bereavement specialist or employee assistance program.

You can learn more about strategies for professional self-care at the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Plan Ahead to Cope With Death and School Crisis**

A death in a school community has a deep impact. The loss will usually touch many individuals—students and staff alike, often the entire school.

It is vital that schools plan ahead to be prepared to deal with a range of possibilities involving the death of a student, teacher or other staff member. Plans should include:

- Procedures for informing staff, students and their parents/guardians.
- Guidelines about what information is appropriate to share, both generally and in specific situations (for instance, what should be said in cases of suicide, violent death, death after a long illness).
- Procedures for providing appropriate supportive services for students and staff. This often includes establishing partnerships with community professionals before an event occurs.
- Guidelines for both students and staff about interacting with media.
- Policies about funeral attendance, memorialization and commemoration.

All schools should have a school crisis team in place that develops the response plan and reviews it regularly. While these events are inevitably challenging, having an effective plan in place allows schools to respond quickly in a thoughtful and productive manner. While it will not take away the pain people feel about the death, it will offer the greatest likelihood of offering the support students and staff most need.

Find out more about the specific steps schools can take at the website for the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Death in a School Community: Four Goals for Supporting Students**

A death in a school community has a deep impact. The loss will usually touch many individuals, students and staff alike, and often the entire school.

It is vital that schools plan ahead to be prepared to deal with a range of possibilities involving the death of a student, teacher or other staff member. Information about the death is likely to spread quickly among students and staff. Responding rapidly and appropriately can limit rumors, misinformation and gossip.

There are four important goals for supporting students at this time:

1. Normalize common experiences. Grief is personal and every individual will experience it differently. However, people who are grieving have similar types of needs. These include being acknowledged, understood and supported.

Help students understand the range of feelings common after a death. Share ways people often express these feelings. Discuss how the feelings are likely to change in the days, weeks and months to come.

2. Help students express and cope with their feelings. Invite questions and comments. Provide a safe, non-judgmental setting for these conversations. Classrooms and small groups offer students a chance to see how others are responding. They can share coping strategies and provide mutual support.
3. Help students find additional resources. Many students will have a fairly straightforward reaction to the death and cope well with the grieving process. Others may have more complicated reactions. This might include students who were close to the deceased or the family, who had conflicts with the deceased, or who identify in some way with the person who died. It might also include students facing other challenges, such as a seriously ill family member, a recent death in the family, or pre-existing emotional challenges.

Talking with a counselor who has experience in bereavement can be helpful. This is especially important for any student experiencing a worsening of anxiety symptoms, depression or thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

4. Help younger students understand concepts about death. Younger students may have more trouble understanding certain concepts about death, such as that all living things eventually die, or the fact that the person who died is no longer feeling fear or pain.

All schools should have a school crisis team in place that develops a response plan in the event of a death. Having an effective plan in place allows schools to respond to these challenging events in a thoughtful and productive manner. While it will not take away the pain people feel about the death, it will offer the greatest likelihood of offering the support students most need.

Find out more about the specific steps schools can take at the website for the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

**For Grieving Students:  
Keep Academic Challenges from Becoming Academic Failures**

A common reaction to grief is difficulty concentrating. Grieving children and teens usually find it hard to remember new facts or master new concepts.

Educators should anticipate these sorts of academic challenges for grieving students. Teachers and other staff can modify lessons in ways that are tremendously helpful. This might include changing the focus of an assignment, coming up with a different way to complete an assignment or postponing a due date.

It's important to offer academic support proactively. You don't need to wait for a grieving student to begin demonstrating academic challenges. Early support from teachers and schools can prevent academic challenges from becoming academic failures.

Learn more about the impact of grief on learning and ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.



## **For Students with Life-Limiting Conditions, Get Peers Involved**

It is increasingly common for children with serious illness to attend school in regular classes. Advances in treatment and a trend toward brief hospitalizations mean that even children with life-limiting conditions can be active in school until very close to the time of their death.

It's important to help peers understand what is happening to a seriously ill classmate. Check with the ill student's parents or guardians, as well as the student, to see what information they would like shared. Focus on providing information about the illness and its treatment at present and in the near-term, not on preparing for their classmate's possible early death.

The goal is to maximize the ill student's current quality of life and allow all students to learn more about supporting one another. Help peers be helpful. Share strategies that lessen the likelihood that the ill student will be isolated. Here are examples of some things peers can do.

- Invite their classmate to join them for recess or lunchtime, or study groups.
- Suggest a sit-down activity (reading out loud, board games, storytelling) if the student is fatigued or unable to walk far.
- Offer to carry books or push a wheelchair between classes.
- Share notes from missed classes, offer to study together, or provide peer tutoring if their classmate is having trouble concentrating because of treatment side effects.
- Share music playlists and listen together.
- Do collaborative creative projects, working on the same drawing, video or story.

Invite the class to come up with their own ideas for group projects that allow the ill student to be engaged in an active and dynamic way.

Find additional guidance at the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* website: [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Support for a Seriously Ill Student: What Teachers Can Do**

It is increasingly common for children with serious illness to attend school in regular classes. Advances in treatment and a trend toward brief hospitalizations mean that even children with life-limiting conditions can be active in school until very close to the time of their death.

It's important to help peers understand what is happening to a seriously ill classmate. Check with the ill student's parents or guardians, as well as the student, to see what information they would like shared. Focus on providing information about the illness and its treatment at present and in the near-term, not on preparing for their classmate's possible early death.

Sometimes the greatest gift teachers can offer such students is the opportunity to feel normal. School and learning are the main work of children's lives. The chance to attend school, actively learn, and contribute in class can offer a continued sense of purpose in life.

### **Steps That Make a Difference**

Check in with the student to see if there is anything he or she wishes communicated to classmates about the illness and its treatment. Some students want to do this themselves. Others would like the teacher or a health provider to speak to the class. Still others don't feel a need to discuss the process with the class.

Children and teens with potentially life-limiting conditions often have a precocious understanding of their illness and likely death. Unfortunately, some parents prefer to think their children are unaware of the seriousness of the situation. Children may protect their parents by entering into a pretense about the matter.

But coping with serious illness and possible early death is challenging for anyone. Children may find themselves emotionally isolated, unable to seek information or reassurance from their family. A trusted adult in the school setting—a teacher, school nurse or counselor—can offer vital support in these situations. Referral to a school mental health professional may be appropriate.

### **Learn More**

Professional self-care for educators supporting a seriously ill student is also important. Find more suggestions for supporting students and obtaining helpful support for yourself at the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* website: [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org). Our organization is a member of the coalition.

## **Grieving Students: Three Things to Know about Death by Suicide**

School staff face unique issues and challenges when supporting students who are grieving a death by suicide. Survivors of suicide experience strong feelings which may limit their ability to put into words the many mixed feelings they experience. A sensitive understanding of their needs is essential when a member of the school community has died in this way.

Here are three things every education professional should know.

1. *It's good to talk.* Talking about suicide will not make people who wouldn't have otherwise thought of harming themselves seriously consider doing so. It is important to offer students, as well as staff, opportunities to talk about their thoughts, feelings and responses. Use the phrase "death by suicide." It shows students you are prepared to talk honestly with them. Prior to doing so, ensure facts are verified and that the family has given permission to share information about the death. Never refer to a "successful suicide."
2. *Focus on the person, not the death.* In conversations with students, it's useful to bring more focus to remembering what made the person who died special, and less to the details of the death. Acknowledge that strong feelings among survivors are common and natural. Encourage students to talk with a parent or other trusted adult if they are considering harming themselves, or if they think someone they know might be thinking about suicide.  
Identify professionals such as school counselors, nurses, psychologists or social workers who students can talk to if they wish. Be sure that needed mental health supports are available over the days and months following the death.
3. *Keep memorialization informal and personal.* Formal recognition or a large memorial event can add a glamorous or romantic quality to the death. This, in turn, might make suicide seem more attractive to other students. Those at increased risk include students experiencing depression, substance abuse or other mental health concerns, engaged in attention-seeking, or having experienced the loss of a family member or friend by suicide. Ideally, all student deaths within the school will be handled the same way.

It's important not to invite anonymous comments about the deceased on websites or posters. Negative comments may appear. Some people may look to blame the deceased or others for the death. In addition, if a student anonymously expresses an intention of self-harm, there is no way to follow up or provide assistance.

You can find additional guidance at the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)), of which our organization is a member. Find sample scripts for discussing suicide with students of different developmental levels, videos of education professionals who have had to cope with a suicide in their school and guidance to help prevent additional or cluster suicides.

## **Preventing Another Suicide: *Postvention***

A major goal of a school's intervention after the suicide of a student, former student or staff member is to prevent a subsequent suicide. This is called *suicide postvention*.

School staff face unique issues and challenges when supporting students who are grieving a death by suicide. Student and adult survivors of suicide experience strong reactions and feelings. These can include shock, guilt, anger, despair and confusion as well as sadness and grief.

Staff often find suicide a difficult topic to discuss. This is not surprising. Stigma about suicide is high, and many of us have had friends, colleagues or family members who have attempted or completed a suicide. Some of us have experienced suicide thoughts or behaviors ourselves.

### **Important Steps**

Schools should take several important steps after a death by suicide in the school community.

Those closest to the person who died should receive direct outreach and support from school or community-based mental health professionals. This would include close friends and classmates of the deceased, as well as friends of the deceased's siblings. The same applies to adults in the school system.

It would also include teammates in sports and co-members of any clubs or interest groups, such as the school band or drama group. It's important to reach out to current or former boyfriends or girlfriends. Survivors are likely to feel guilty about or responsible for the death, especially when there has been a recent fight or breakup.

Students who are known to have depression, substance abuse, or other mental health concerns, who have expressed suicide thoughts in the past or who have a family member who died by suicide should also receive direct outreach.

Students should be strongly encouraged to discuss any concerns they have about a risk for self-harm in a peer, or themselves, with a trusted adult. This is important even if the information was shared with them in confidence.

Schools affected by a suicide death should communicate with other schools and community mental health agencies in the area. This may help identify whether any factors may be contributing to an increase in suicide attempts. It can also reveal possible connections between students who may be at-risk. Experts suggest that the following steps may help prevent further suicides.

1. Develop a coordinated community response plan
2. Provide an opportunity for students to talk with a mental health professional about the causes of self-harming behaviors
3. Offer both individual and group counseling to affected peers
4. Provide information to parents and caregivers on how to recognize suicide risk and get help for their children
5. Screen high risk individuals through suicide risk assessments

6. Partner with the media to responsibly report about the mental health and substance abuse problems which can lead to suicide attempts

### **Learn More**

Learn more about how to reach such experts and find additional guidance about how education professionals can support students after a suicide at the *Coalition for Grieving Students* ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)). Our organization is a member of the coalition.

## **Commemorating a Death: What Should Schools Do?**

When a student, teacher or other member of the school community dies, the wish to commemorate the death is natural. Some actions are appropriate and helpful. Others can be problematic. Here are some steps schools can take to ensure commemorations are useful for students.

### *Keep the Purpose in Mind*

Memorial and commemorative activities help students express and cope with difficult feelings and realize they are not alone in having strong feelings. They can draw on support of peers and adults and begin to find meaning in the loss.

### *Include Students*

It's essential to include students in the planning process. By planning a meaningful and appropriate memorial, students are able to exercise some control over how they choose to remember the person who died. In situations where adults carry out all of the planning, the events tend to be helpful for the adults rather than the students.

### *Set Appropriate Precedents*

Deaths can occur in many different ways—cancer, drug overdose, natural disaster or through an act that seems “heroic,” such as stopping to help a stalled motorist and being struck by another vehicle. Choose commemorative activities that can be applied fairly and consistently in any circumstance. If a “heroic” death is recognized by a large memorial service at school, friends of a student who dies by suicide or a drug overdose may resent that their friend's death is not similarly acknowledged.

### *Avoid Permanent Memorials*

It is best to avoid legacy memorials such as placing a plaque or planting a tree. These markers may be vandalized or fall into disrepair; living memorials such as trees may die. Over time, few students at the school will have any personal connection to the person who died. In communities with high rates of violence, markers for students who have died may be viewed by peers as a body count.

### *Manage Spontaneous Memorials*

Monitor spontaneous memorials that may appear. Remove inappropriate material promptly (e.g., alcohol bottles, drug paraphernalia, negative comments about the deceased or other students). Work with students to move the location if the materials block hallways or exits. Discuss with them how long the memorial will be in place—usually a few days to a week—and plan what will happen to the materials that have been placed there.

## **Learn More**

The *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* (of which our organization is a member) offers more information and guidance about memorialization and commemoration. The materials at their website ([www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)) are designed specifically for school professionals.

