



Back to School 2021: Grieving Students, Transitions and COVID-19

2021 is a different kind of back-to-school year. As schools move toward full in-person learning, students and educators alike continue to adapt.

In the transition back to in-person learning, schools may need to reach out to students who have not returned to school or re-engaged in learning. They may also be making contact with families that have suffered multiple stressors and losses caused by the pandemic or exacerbated by the isolation of shut-downs.

Many students and educators are grieving what has been lost during COVID-19 closures—chances to socialize with peers, be a senior in middle school, start kindergarten, participate in sports or performing arts. Most have been affected by ongoing issues in the broader world as well—social justice, racial inequities, bitter political divides, the financial impact of the pandemic.

Students who are grieving the death of a family member or loved one are part of this mix. Even before the pandemic, student grief was surprisingly common.

About 1 in 20 students will lose a parent during their school years, and virtually all students will know someone who has died by the time they complete high school. During the pandemic, students have lost loved ones to many causes, including COVID-19. Some communities have been especially hard hit by the virus. Students are also still grieving losses that occurred before the pandemic.

Students who experienced a death of someone close from a cause other than COVID-19 may feel the attention focused on tragic losses due to the pandemic means they are somehow less entitled to grieve openly and request support. This may prompt them to try to keep their feelings private. They may have had to begin to grieve the loss while separated from extended family and friends, and without the usual support of peers. This would further heighten their sense of isolation.

Times of transition and change can be particularly challenging for grieving students. Educators are in a position to offer valuable support that can make a profound difference in students' lives academically,

socially and emotionally—often through simple gestures that help these students feel affirmed and understood. The Coalition to Support Grieving Students has a collection of [free video and written materials](#) that offer guidance designed expressly for educators, including [content specific to COVID-19](#).

TRANSITIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR ANY STUDENT

Transitions are times when children and youth may face a range of challenges. The following steps will support both grieving and other students.

- » **Address apprehensions.** Students are excited to be with peers and start a new year. They may also have lingering fears about risks of illness or death. Provide honest, realistic reassurances about measures being taken to protect students and educators.
- » **Be honest.** Students know things are not “normal.” It isn’t necessary to pretend that everything is okay

when it clearly isn't. Provide opportunities for students to discuss their experiences and concerns.

- » **Introduce subjects sensitively.** Educators cannot know every student's experiences. When a history, literature, or other lesson addresses topics such as death, loss, trauma, severe illness, racism, or other serious matters, provide some background before the lesson. Give students the opportunity to discuss any concerns with you privately. Make accommodations for the student when indicated.
- » **Offer options for activities involving family members.** Many students do not have a parent to turn to for family-based classroom or homework activities. This may be due to death, illness, divorce, military deployment, incarceration, or other reasons. Be sure to offer options: "For this essay, I'd like you to write about your mother or another woman in your life who has been helpful to you."

REACH OUT TO GRIEVING STUDENTS

All children grieve in unique ways. There are also common characteristics for most grieving students. Over the past year, these students have been especially affected by the consequences of the pandemic— isolation, academic challenges, worry about their own and others' health, feeling overwhelmed. If you know a student is grieving the death of a family member or

friend, the following steps can be especially helpful.

- » **Reach out personally early in the year.** Acknowledge that grief creates challenges. Let the student know you are available to talk, or listen, if any concerns arise. For specific guidance on what to say, see [these Coalition materials](#).
- » **Remember that grieving children experience secondary losses.** Many things can change for a child after a death. The family may need to move in with relatives or find less expensive housing. The child may have to attend a new school. During the pandemic, with its associated financial challenges, many families have had to make exactly these kinds of changes.
- » **Make adjustments in academic work.** It is difficult to concentrate and learn during acute grief. Extending deadlines and offering alternative assignments can help grieving students experience academic success as they readjust to their life after a loss.
- » **Support college and career aspirations.** After a death, some teens hesitate to move forward with plans to go to college, join the military, or attend trade school. They may feel a need to stay close to their family or provide financial support. Concerns about COVID-19 have added further distress to these decisions. While there is no "correct" solution, the support of a trusted educator who can

listen to a student's concerns can be invaluable.

- » **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.
- » **Offer to assist in future transitions.** Ask the student and parents if they would like you to notify a new school of the student's circumstances. This can create a safer and more welcoming setting for the student.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Educators have also been affected by the pandemic, experiencing loss, stressors, and other hardships. Children depend on important adults to help them feel safe and secure. If an educator is anxious, sad, or angry, students are more likely to be affected by that emotional state than by the words they hear. The Coalition offers [a module on steps for self-care](#) for educators supporting grieving children.

Self-care is not an "add on." It is an essential step, allowing educators to offer powerful support to worried and grieving students. Educators generally experience many personal rewards when they join in this vital effort.

