



Coordinating Services and Supporting Transitions

Take-Home Message

Grieving students interact with a large number of school personnel. Ideally, all of these professionals will function as a team that coordinates services. It is critical that representatives from this group maintain effective communication with the student and the family. The team can offer information and status updates, answer questions, provide referrals, and support grieving students over time and during periods of transition.

Functioning as a Team

Grieving students are likely to interact with many different school professionals every day. These include educators, administrators, and support staff. Each has the potential to offer valuable assistance to students. Other school personnel may also be available, such as school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers.

Each provider brings different perspectives and unique insights about the student's experience. Working together, they can identify strategies most likely to be helpful for students. It is important the group function as a team, communicating together often and coordinating services. It is critical that they maintain frequent, effective contact with the student and the family.

The team can offer the family information, status updates, answers to questions, and responses to concerns. They can provide referrals where appropriate and partner with the family to coordinate support strategies between school and home.

Choosing a Primary Contact

It is often helpful to establish one (or a few) primary points of contact for student and family. Families may feel overwhelmed if they are being regularly updated by many school staff members, especially if they have more than one child in the school system. Students may find many update meetings burdensome. They may not wish to discuss the impact of their loss with multiple adults at the school on a regular basis.

Ideal primary contacts might be a team member who already has a special relationship with the student or one who has a greater level of comfort or experience supporting grieving students and families. The main contact for the parent or caregiver may be the same individual, or someone different.

It is important to ensure that there is at least one point of contact for every student who has experienced a significant loss. This contact should be clearly and expressly identified by the team so there isn't a mistaken assumption that "someone else is taking care of this."

Each Member's Unique Role

While one person may take on the role of primary contact with the student and family, this doesn't mean that all responsibility for support is delegated to that person. Each member of the team can take on a unique role, depending on the student's and family's needs.

For example, the English teacher might support the student with organizational skills and planning for the transition back to school. The math teacher might monitor and help balance the student's cumulative workload across various subjects. The school counselor might meet with the family to discuss how the student and family are coping. An administrator may check school records and databases to be sure future letters or report cards are not addressed to a parent who died.

Support During Transitions

Transitions between schools—and even between grades—can be both exciting and stressful for all students. There may be a change in teachers, routines, rules, schedules, and peer groups. The academic curriculum may be more demanding.

For grieving students, these stressors can be more severe. They are particularly vulnerable at times of transition. The person who died may have been someone who provided valuable guidance or support at such times—a sister who offered advice on navigating a new social network, a dad who was there to listen with compassion when changes felt overwhelming. Feelings of grief and loss may be accentuated.



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The school team can help grieving students during transitions between grades in the same school, or during promotions to other schools. With the student's knowledge and the family's permission, school professionals can communicate the student's needs and describe strategies that have been effective in providing support.

When a student is changing grades or classrooms in the same school, the information can be shared with the new teachers. The team can explore ways to provide some constancy in the support the student receives. Perhaps the student will continue to meet regularly with a school counselor, be invited to check in with a favorite teacher, or continue to receive additional support from the coach.

For transition to a new school, it will be helpful for the team to share information with teachers, administrators, counseling staff, and school health personnel. Parents may not realize that this information is not automatically shared with a new school. The school team can also help the family identify ways to prepare the new school to best support their child. In some cases, students may benefit from meeting with the new team before the start of the new year to discuss options for ongoing support.

Older Students: Special Concerns for High School Juniors and Seniors

High school juniors and seniors may be especially challenged by the death of a family member or close friend. They are coping with heightened academic demands and scrutiny. Difficulties concentrating and learning that are common in bereavement may seem to carry major implications for their future success.

Students who are considering upcoming independence from their families—by going to college, embarking on a career, or leaving the family home—are typically ambivalent to some degree. They want separation from their parents, but also worry about how well they can live without their family's support and comfort.

After a death, students may become more anxious about leaving friends and family behind. They may worry that something will happen to their loved ones, or to themselves, if they don't remain together. They may feel new obligations about assisting a surviving parent with chores, providing emotional support, or getting a job to help the family financially. A plan to pursue personal goals may feel like a selfish act, or even abandonment.

Delaying independence from the family immediately after a significant death may be the best choice for the student and family in some situations. However, it is important to explore carefully whether this is truly in the best interests of the student and aligns with the student's personal choice. Involvement of the school counselor or other student support professional may help the family and student explore these options in a careful, balanced way.



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

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