



NATIONAL CENTER  
FOR SCHOOL CRISIS  
AND BEREAVEMENT

## When School Starts Back: Supporting grieving students during a pandemic



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# Loss is Common in the Lives of Children

**93%**

of classroom  
educators have  
**never received any  
training**  
in how to support a  
grieving student

**5%**

of children experience  
the **death of parent** by 16

Vast majority of children

**(9 of 10)**

experience the **death of  
a family member** and/or  
friend by the time  
they complete high school

# Children may not appear to be grieving

- Adults may communicate death is not discussed
- Children may
  - not yet understand what has happened or its implications
  - be overwhelmed by feelings
  - express grief indirectly through behavior or play

# Being with someone in distress

- Do not try to “cheer up” survivors
- Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
- Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
- Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel), “Both my parents died when I was your age” (don’t compete for sympathy)
- Allow child/family to be upset while suspending judgment – intervene only when safety/health is concern

# Addressing cultural diversity

- Some people are worried they will say or do the wrong thing because they feel ill informed about another culture
- Although there are differences in cultural practices, the fundamental experience of grief is universal
- When we recognize that there is a range of ways to experience and express grief, we can explore ways to bridge cultural differences in order to help grieving children and families

# Supporting children of a different culture

- Ask questions when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual
- Assumptions may result in stereotypes that cloud our perceptions and make us miss opportunities to be helpful
- Approach the family with an open mind and heart
- Help families identify and communicate what is important to them about cultural practices; work with them to find solutions and compromises when realities require modifications in cultural practices

# Initiating the conversation

- Express concern
- Be genuine
- Invite conversation
- Listen and observe
- Limit personal sharing
- Offer practical advice
- Offer reassurance without minimizing concerns
- Maintain contact

# Peer support

- Most children want to help friends, yet often have limited experience
- May make insensitive comments, ask repetitive or detailed questions, or tease grieving peer
- Study of children ages 6-15 who experienced death of parent: 20% “experienced direct, raw taunting about their loss”
- Educators can help students develop skills to support a peer who is grieving



# Children's guilt

- Young children tend to be:
  - Egocentric
  - Have limited understanding of cause of death
    - Magical thinking
- Results in guilt
  - Reassure children of lack of responsibility

# Academic accommodations

- It is common for students to experience temporary academic challenges after a death; pre-existing learning challenges often become worse
- Offer academic support proactively – don't wait for academic challenges to become academic failure
- Change an assignment, e.g.,
  - Allow student to work with a partner
  - Adapt formal research paper into more engaging assignment
- Change focus or timing of lesson
- Reschedule or adapt tests

# Helpful responses to a grief trigger

- Provide a safe space or an adult the student can talk to
- Set procedures for the student to obtain support
- Let the student call a parent or family member if necessary
- Provide permission and encouragement to see school nurse, counselor, or social worker
- Offer private time with teacher to talk about feelings

# Grief during a pandemic

- After a death, children often concerned about the health of themselves or others close to them
  - Important to help children deal with fears/concerns about the pandemic
- Physical distancing/school closure increase social isolation; makes it difficult to provide support
- Secondary losses become even more of an issue
- Family members may be overwhelmed by the pandemic in addition to their own grief
- Some grief may not be related to death
- Supporting grieving students can be difficult in the best of times; this is not the best of times



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# Coalition to Support Grieving Students

- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)

# Supporting Organizational Members



NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL CRISIS AND BEREAVEMENT



COALITION *to* SUPPORT  
GRIEVING STUDENTS

Video and Downloadable Grief Support  
Modules for School Personnel

## Conversation & Support

Talking With Children >

What Not to Say >

Providing Support Over Time >

Peer Support >

VIEW MODULES



Conversation &  
Support

Developmental &  
Cultural Considerations

Practical  
Considerations

Reactions & Triggers

Professional  
Preparation & Self-Care

Crisis & Special  
Circumstances

# Modules Placed into Six Sections

- Each section contains 2-4 video modules; each video is accompanied by handout that summarizes major points
- Conversation and Support
- Developmental and Cultural Considerations
- Practical Considerations
- Reactions and Triggers
- Professional Preparation and Self-Care
- Crisis and Other Special Circumstances



# Additional Resources

- Additional Modules (e.g., police or military deaths)
- Guidance Documents
  - Practical guidelines developed by the NCSCB on how to respond to the death of a student or staff, from all causes or from suicide
- Training module
- Family and school staff booklets
- Articles
- Online Resources

[www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)

*Order Free Materials (download)*



After a loved one dies—

How children grieve and how parents  
and other adults can support them.

For further information about NCSCB  
visit us, call us, like us, share us



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