



# Supporting grieving students during a pandemic

## A guide to using the *Coalition to Support Grieving Students* materials

The current COVID-19 Pandemic has caused a large and expanding number of deaths in the United States and abroad, while also requiring the implementation of social distancing measures, including lengthy school closures, that makes it increasingly difficult to provide bereavement support to grieving students in the usual ways we relied upon prior to the pandemic. The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was created to ensure that no child had to grieve alone—the free video-based and print resources can be used to meet this goal even during social distancing. This guidance will underscore some of the unique characteristics of grief during a pandemic and highlight resources on the [Coalition to Support Grieving Student website](#) for addressing these challenges. Given that this is an evolving pandemic, information will change over time (this is current advice as of April 5, 2020); we aim to create new resources and will post them on the Coalition website.

### **The pandemic is causing not only widespread illness, but also widespread health concerns.**

After the death of someone close, children often become more concerned about their health and that of others they care about. In the setting of a pandemic, there is already often extreme concerns about personal health and that of others. The ability to reassure children that others close to them are healthy and not at risk of dying becomes

challenging, even if the initial death was unrelated to the pandemic or an infectious disease. It becomes important to help children deal with their fears and concerns about the pandemic, in addition to any grief they may be experiencing after a personal loss.

The [COVID-19 Pandemic Resources webpage](#) includes presentations for educators, parents and other professionals on how to talk to and support children during a pandemic. Here you will also find select guidance materials as well as links to the COVID-19 resource pages of other school professional organizations that are members of the Coalition. This information will help address children's anxiety related to the pandemic—whether they are grieving a personal loss or worried about the deaths they see reported in the media.

### **Social distancing measures, including lengthy school closures, increases the social isolation generally experienced by grieving children and makes it difficult for schools to provide support using traditional means.**

While this is certainly true, it is also true that schools often do provide meaningful support to grieving students when deaths occur during summer vacation and holiday breaks—using phone, email and the internet. These same strategies can be used during a pandemic when school closures are required.

- Given that most support to parents and other family members of grieving students is usually not provided by school professionals in person, the module [Connecting with Families](#) provides some advice on how to provide remote support.

- Many children's bereavement programs across the country are quickly adapting to the pandemic by providing virtual groups and/or individual support. Contact the organizations in your area to see how they can assist. Check the [National Bereavement Resource Guide: State by State Bereavement Listing](#) complied by New York Life and eluna for a list of bereavement organizations in your state to identify local support for bereaved children and their families.

### **Secondary losses become even more of an issue.**

After the death of a close family member or friend, children need not only to cope with the loss of the person that died, but also the loss of everything that person did or could have done for them. During a pandemic that requires social distancing and school closures, the magnitude and importance of the secondary losses may be accentuated. Children who live alone with one or both parents may find acute challenges to meeting basic needs such as obtaining food, preparing meals, or providing supervision

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during the day and evening when only one parent is in the home, especially when that parent is grieving and feeling overwhelmed by the pandemic. The usual outpouring of assistance, support, and companionship that would normally be provided by extended family, friends, neighbors, and members of the school community in the immediate aftermath of a death may not occur—funerals may need to be postponed and family and friends unable to visit.

- The module [Secondary and Cumulative Losses](#) addresses this topic.

### **Family members may be overwhelmed by the pandemic in addition to their own grief.**

Surviving parents not only have to deal with their own grief, but they have to deal with the impact of the pandemic—worries about their own health and others they care about and for; financial implications; practical concerns such as how to obtain food and needed services—all while caring for their grieving children. Extended family and friends are likely to be pre-occupied with the pandemic and meeting the needs of their own family. The role of school professionals becomes even more important.

- [After a Loved One Dies](#) can be downloaded and emailed to family members to provide guidance on how to support grieving children.

### **Children may experience more than one personal loss; deaths of students and staff may impact the entire school community.**

As the number of deaths increase in the country, children may experience more than one loss. Especially early on in the pandemic, the deaths may cluster due to the nature of the spread of the virus the grief children experience from multiple losses can be particularly overwhelming.

- The module [Secondary and Cumulative Losses](#) addresses issues to consider when children experience multiple losses.

- The death of a student or school staff member can have a profound effect on the entire school community, with virtually everyone impacted to some degree. The module on [Death and School Crisis](#) covers unique considerations to consider when this occurs.

### **Some children's grief may not be related to a loss due to death.**

For some children who don't experience the death of someone they know, they may still have to cope with separation from loved ones (such as due to hospitalization, quarantine, travel restrictions, or the inability to visit older relatives or friends). They may also grieve their inability to celebrate their graduation, birthday, or special holidays. Transitions, such as from high school to college or from middle school to high school, may be particularly challenging during a pandemic.

- The guidance document [Ambiguous Loss](#) addresses this topic.
- The module [Coordinating Services and Supporting Transitions](#) discusses how to support grieving students as they transition to new grades or schools.

### **Grieving students often experience at least temporary academic difficulties—so do children during a crisis.**

As schools transition rapidly to on-line learning in the context of an evolving pandemic, many children may find it hard to focus and are experiencing academic challenges. Many educators are likely uncomfortable with abrupt shifts to remote and distance engagement approaches, changing expectations for instruction, and lost connections with students and colleagues.

Appropriate standards for graduation and grading may not yet have been established by school administrators.

- The modules [Impact on Learning](#) and [Grief Triggers](#) offer important insights and recommendations that are relevant for all students during a pandemic—whether or not they are grieving.

### **Supporting grieving students can be difficult in the best of times; this is not the best of times.**

This is a particularly difficult—but critical—time to maintain your professional self-care. Some of the ways school professionals meet their self-care needs is through the community of professionals within the school, but that requires more effort due to social distancing. The impact of this pandemic may be longer than perhaps most of us are prepared to accept. It's critical to invest in your professional self-care now.

- The module [Professional Self-Care](#) offers some suggestions for strategies for professional self-care.

### **This is an unprecedented time, but there are practical steps school professionals can take to support grieving students, even during a pandemic.**

School professionals have always played a critical role in supporting their students during times of personal and family crisis and in response to school and community crisis events as well—and they can continue to do so even from a distance. There was never a time when the need was greater. Try to recognize and appreciate the critical support you still do provide. Although your students may not directly tell you, they certainly will. They will always remember this period in their life. Your support and assistance, particularly if you help them deal with the intense feelings associated with grief, can be a major part of that memory.

The [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) is a unique collaboration of the leading professional organizations representing classroom educators (including teachers, paraprofessionals, and other instructional staff), principals, assistant principals, superintendents, school board members, and central office staff, student support personnel (including school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, school social workers, and other student support personnel), and other school professionals who have come together with a common conviction: grieving students need the support and care of the school community. The Coalition to Support Grieving Students created a free school practitioner-oriented website, [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org), with over 20 video training modules on topics ranging from how to talk with grieving students to responding to a school crisis event. Module summaries, handouts, reference materials, and guidance documents providing step-by-step practical advice are available for free download and endorsed by over 90 professional organizations, as well as free resources for parents and other caring adults.