



Back to School 2023: Grieving Students and Transitions

The fall of 2023 will be a different kind of school year for many educators. For one thing, schools and communities have lifted COVID-19 restrictions. Life is feeling more like it used to. Educators are working to address the academic losses of the pandemic and students are re-engaging socially with their peers.

Even as the impact of the pandemic is diminishing, however, its effects continue to touch both students and educators. Some will still be grieving the deaths of close family members or friends who died during the pandemic (whether from COVID-19 or some other cause).

Students may also be grieving other losses. During the years restrictions were in place, they may have lost chances to be part of an athletic team in an important competition, socialize with peers, start kindergarten, participate in performing arts, or make the transition to high school. Most have been affected by ongoing issues in the broader world as well—social justice, racial inequities, bitter political divides, violence related to war in other countries, the financial impact of the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, student grief was surprisingly common. About 1 in 20 students experienced the death of a parent during their school years (that number is higher post-pandemic). Virtually all students will know someone who has died by the time they complete high school.

Educators can offer valuable support that makes a profound difference in grieving students' lives. Often, this calls only for simple gestures that help students feel understood and affirmed in their experiences. The Coalition to Support Grieving Students has a collection of [free video and written materials](#) that offer guidance designed expressly for educators.

TRANSITIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR ANY STUDENT

As students return to school in 2023, it's important to remember that transitions are times when children and

youth 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, violence or death. Provide honest, realistic reassurances about measures being taken to protect students and educators.

» **Be honest.** Provide opportunities for students to discuss their experiences and concerns.

» **Introduce subjects sensitively.** Educators cannot know every student's experience. When a history, literature, or other lesson addresses topics such as violence, death, loss, trauma, severe illness, racism, war, or other serious matters, provide some background before the lesson. Give students the opportunity to discuss any concerns with you privately. Make accommodations 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 three years, grieving 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. Some grieving families' situations are complicated by financial challenges that resulted from the pandemic.

» **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, attend trade school, or begin a job. 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 upcoming transitions.** Ask the student and parents/caregivers 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 experienced losses, additional work demands, personal stressors, and other hardships. 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 the best possible support to worried and grieving students.