



# Recognizing and Supporting Student Grief after Loss

Over the past year, millions of school children across the country have experienced loss, including death, loss of a stable home environment, and limited access to critical resources resulting in losses of physical<sup>1</sup> and psychological<sup>2</sup> safety. Schools are one of the most effective and accessible settings for mental health services for students and often the first point of contact to facilitate conversations around loss.<sup>3</sup> However, to meet the current level of need it will be essential for districts to provide resources and professional development to assist educators with supporting students experiencing grief. This document provides background information on the prevalence of loss and common indicators of grief in children. It then highlights targeted supports and strategies for schools and districts, including proactive trauma-informed care, tips for facilitating conversations on loss, and resources for supporting students and staff.

## Prevalence of Loss and Grief

There have been over a half a million deaths from COVID-19 in the United States alone.<sup>4</sup>

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic:<sup>5</sup>

- **1 in 5 children** will experience the loss of someone close to them
- **1 in 14 children** will experience the death of a parent or sibling
- **4.9 million children** experience grief before the age of 18

During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

- **1 in 9 family members** will have experienced the loss of a loved one
- An increase in deaths over the past 12 to 18 months has led to an **increase in grieving** for sudden loss of someone close
- Grief may be related to **death, loss of employment or a stable home environment, or reduced access to critical supports including food security**

Grief is a form of trauma which falls under **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**<sup>6</sup> that can have lifelong effects. In schools, grief intervention typically involves identifying those students or staff members that have recently experienced a loss, as well as addressing loss at the school or community level in the wake of an event or crisis.

## Common Reactions to Loss

### Preschool

- Difficulty with permanence of death
- Increased anxiety, quieter
- More aggressive behaviors
- Stomachaches, decreased appetite and physical activity

### Elementary School

- Broad conclusions about death
- May act out event repeatedly
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased impulsivity, irritability, aggression, clinging
- Headaches, stomachaches
- Difficulties sleeping

### Middle/High School

- More factual understanding of death
- Depression, risk-taking
- Social withdrawal
- Survivor's guilt
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares<sup>7, 8</sup>

## One District's Targeted Approach to Addressing Student Grief

San Antonio Independent School District addresses grief from multiple perspectives. School social workers and counselors utilize [needs assessments](#) to inform short-term interventions. The district has established a partnership with the [Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas](#) to offer students and their parents support groups to address loss and bereavement. For example, [Camp Heroes](#) gives 2nd-5th grade students an opportunity to surround themselves with peers who have encountered a similar loss experience. The [Wonders and Worries](#) social service agency is another district partner that supports students who have a parent or guardian enduring a grave or life-threatening illness. For district employees who have encountered grief and toxic stress, the district partnered with the Harvard Graduate School of Education to focus on Wellness for Teachers. For those students impacted by death by suicide, the [David's Legacy](#) Foundation and the [Alamo Area Teen Suicide Prevention Coalition](#) provide immediate resources to the SAISD support services team.

## Tips for Addressing Grief

**Consider the student's cultural background and norms in expressing grief and loss.** Seeking help outside of the family may not be typical, or in some cases, acceptable within certain cultural groups and religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Schools can help students and families by acknowledging cultural differences and increasing access to resources both within and outside of the school system.

**Include multiple avenues for expressing grief.** These avenues may include individual or class-wide discussions on grief (e.g., remembering the loss), activities or alternative methods for expressing grief such as drawing prompts, and teaching students coping strategies (e.g., self-care).

**Do not pressure students to talk.** Provide a variety of different ways (e.g., journaling) for students to express their grief without there being pressure to talk about it.

**Support students and staff.** Consider the potential impact of discussions of death and loss on educators that have personally experienced grief. Recognize key events and milestones throughout the year that may trigger feelings of loss. Identify school mental health professionals to assist (or take the place of) educators to facilitate discussions when necessary.

**Provide opportunities for students to ask questions about grief.** Be patient with students and take the time to fully understand them. This will send the signal that they have a safe environment in which to process grief.

**Avoid making assumptions about students' reactions to grief.** The best response to students is to listen nonjudgmentally and to acknowledge their feelings.<sup>10</sup>

## Action Steps for Districts

Based on your district's readiness for supporting student grief, here are **three potential next steps**.

- 1. Build structural supports and ensure students and staff know where and how to seek support.** For example, many districts regularly include hotlines or support websites in schoolwide communication to staff, and provide tips and resources to teachers on how to discuss grief at the classroom level.
- 2. Evaluate current services capacity.** There is likely to be substantial increases in students and staff experiencing loss. Districts must evaluate current staffing and relevant expertise in meeting these needs.
- 3. Leverage high impact practices.** If current capacity is lacking, districts should consider triaging support. For example, identifying clusters of students or schools with high rates of loss to be prioritized for universal programming as opposed to one-to-one service delivery.

### Where to start?

#### Review/distribute resources such as:

- Support for Student and Educator Stress
- Social, Emotional, Behavioral Screening
- Grief and Trauma Screening
- Supporting Students during COVID-19
- Family and Educator Resources during COVID-19
- COVID-19 School Resource Center
- Sesame Street Grief Resources

### Strategies

Examples of **Tier I (Universal) Strategies** could include:

- Choosing a Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum

Examples of **Tier II (Supplemental) Strategies** could include:

- Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)
- Bounce Back
- Grief and Trauma Intervention (GTI) for Children

Click [here](#) for references.