

Mini-Articles: Coordinating Services & Supporting Transitions

Support for Grieving Students: A Team Makes It Happen

When a student experiences the death of a loved one, what should schools do? One essential step for a school supporting a grieving student is to work as a team in their efforts. Here's an example.

Fifth grader Elia's family was devastated when her older sister died in a car crash. Elia's school stepped up to give Elia and her family whatever support they could.

Her teacher touched base with the family right away, attended the funeral service, and made adjustments in Elia's coursework to ease her transition back to school. She also discussed the matter with Elia's classmates to help them offer appropriate support when the girl returned to class.

Elia's PE teacher and reading tutor were informed of the events. The principal encouraged everyone on staff to review content from the in-service on grieving students they had completed at the start of the year. The school counselor, school nurse and district psychologist were all ready to speak to Elia if she wished. A pediatrician in the community who was a bereavement specialist was also notified, and stood ready to help.

These education professionals were taking appropriate steps to support their student. But with some coordination and teamwork, the impact can be even greater. Here are some other things they can do:

- Have a team meeting to plan and coordinate support. Discuss each person's unique role and potential contributions.
- Choose a primary contact person for the family. Families may feel overwhelmed if they are contacted by many school staff.
- Choose a primary contact person (or two) to provide support for the student for both the near and longer term. This helps avoid a mistaken assumption on any issue that "someone else is taking care of this."

Learn about other steps teams can take to coordinate and plan their support at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

Grieving Students and Transitions: Vulnerable Times

Transitions are a normal part of growing up and participating in school life. Students move from one activity to another throughout the day. At the start of the school year, they transition to a new class. And in certain years, they graduate and transition to new schools.

These transitions are challenging for all students. They are likely to have new teachers and routines, new rules and schedules, and even new friends.

For students who have experienced the death of a loved one, the stress of transitions is often even more severe. The person who died may have been someone who provided valuable guidance—someone who is deeply missed at these vulnerable times.

“My mom knew what to say when things were hard or I was nervous about something.”

“My sister could always calm my family down. They all seem really crazy right now.”

“I’m sad that my dad doesn’t know who I am now that I’m older and more mature.”

Providing Support

School teams can help grieving students at transitions between grades or during promotions to new schools. First, a team should get permission from the student and his or her family to talk with new teachers (in the same school), or administrators, teachers, counselors and school health staff (at a new school).

The team can communicate the student’s needs and strengths, as well as strategies that have been effective in providing support.

The student can be invited to check back in regularly with a school counselor, favorite teacher or coach for ongoing support and consistency during the time of transition.

Learn more about supporting grieving students through transitions at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

When Older Students Experience Grief: Special Concerns

High school juniors and seniors often face special challenges when a family member or close friend dies.

After a death, difficulty concentrating and learning are common. Younger students may expect to catch up. Older students, coping with heightened academic demands and scrutiny, often fear they are falling irretrievably behind.

While most teens are ambivalent about separating from their families, grieving youth often become even more anxious about leaving friends and family behind. Will something happen to their loved ones? If they leave, will they ever see these people again? What if they need support themselves—who will help them deal with their own grief?

A plan to pursue education when the family is in need may feel selfish. Students may feel obligated to provide economic or emotional support to a parent who is also grieving.

What's the Right Course?

What should older students do in these situations? Every student and family situation will be different. The most important thing school staff can do is help students explore carefully and honestly what is in their own and their family's best interests.

Involvement of a school counselor or other student support professional can be helpful for both student and family as they endeavor to explore these options in a careful, balanced way.

Learn more about supporting students experiencing grief at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](https://grievingstudents.org). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create grievingstudents.org, a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.