

Mini-Articles: Secondary & Cumulative Losses

For Children, Death Takes Away More Than a Loved One

When children lose a parent or other close family member, they mourn that person. Most school professionals understand and expect this.

However, there are additional losses related to the death that can affect children deeply. These are often less familiar to families and school professionals alike.

The death is considered a *primary loss*. Events and changes that occur as the result of the death are considered *secondary losses*.

Common secondary losses include:

- *Changed relationships.* Children may no longer see people who were friends and associates of the deceased. Some of these relationships may seem incidental to adults, but they can be quite significant to children.
- *Change in school.* If a family must move after a death, children may lose touch with old friends while having to adjust to a new school environment.
- *Change in lifestyle.* If a family faces financial challenges after a death, they may move to a smaller home. There may be less money to support participation in extracurricular activities. Reduced family resources circumstances may lead to loss of status for children among their peers.
- *A parent who is less available.* A surviving parent may have to work more and have less time to spend with children. A parent struggling with depression may not be emotionally available.
- *Change in future plans.* If a parent or provider has died, teens may not be able to follow through on plans for college or career training. They may face financial challenges or feel an obligation to keep the family together rather than move away.

When school personnel are aware of these types of loss, they are better able to provide helpful support to students. Appreciating and recognizing the range of losses a student might experience is a good first step. Ask specifically about these issues, or use what you already know about a student to offer support.

Learn more about secondary loss and ways to offer support at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

Even in Violent Communities, Children Don't "Get Used To Death"

What happens to children who have experienced the death of a peer? What if they have gone through this multiple times? What if one or more family members have died?

These experiences are not uncommon in some communities. Children may know many people who have died violently. They may have seen bodies on the street as they walk to school. They may hear gunshots at night—or in the daytime.

Too often, adults assume children somehow become accustomed to these losses. The children and teens may not seem to react when they hear of another death. They may look like they don't care.

The truth is these experiences affect them deeply. Each death makes them more vulnerable to the impact of future loss. These cumulative losses accentuate the feelings of sadness, anxiety and stress they are having.

School personnel can help by providing opportunities for students to express themselves and be heard by concerned, caring and competent adults. While this is true in all settings, it is perhaps even more critical where students have experienced cumulative loss.

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After a Death, More Losses Await

When children lose a parent or other close family member, they mourn that person. Most school professionals understand and expect this. However, there are additional losses related to the death that can affect children deeply. These are often less familiar to school professionals.

The story below, about a young man whose plans for college were interrupted by a death in the family, illustrates some of the secondary losses that can face grieving children and teens.

I was planning to go to an out-of-state college. I was really excited. I'd be the first person in my family to attend college.

And then my dad died of a heart attack. Totally unexpected. My family just sort of fell apart. My mom had this part-time job cleaning hotel rooms. There was no money. I had two little sisters at home.

I had to go to work full time. It was the only way we could survive. I barely finished high school. I thought I could pick up some classes at the community college, but there was no way. We were all so sad. My sisters and mom needed me. I had to be with them when I wasn't at work.

If this young man had been your student, what could you have done to support him?

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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.