

# BACK TO SCHOOL WITH GRIEF AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



**The start of any school year means adjusting to new people and expectations. This is especially true for children who are grieving the death of a parent, caregiver, sibling, or someone else important in their lives. With the COVID-19 pandemic, going back to school is likely to bring up additional challenges for children and teens who are grieving and the adults who care for them.**

How to help children depends on several factors: How old is your child and what grade are they in? Who died in their life and what was their relationship? How did the person die? When did the loss occur? In the current context, it's important to consider other losses children have experienced during the COVID-19 health crisis and how the effects of racism and the increased news coverage of racial violence also impact children who are grieving. While each child's experience will be unique to them, these questions may be helpful as you consider how to best support your child or teen.

No matter our age, we experience grief on many levels: emotional, physical, cognitive, spiritual, and behavioral. Whether it's the emotional ups and downs of relating with peers, trying to focus on schoolwork, or having to talk about family culture and beliefs and how those impact us and the world around us, school can be a place that engages multiple facets of grief.

Transitions can be difficult for anyone, but especially so for those who are grieving. As

your family moves from the rhythm of summer back to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, children and teens may be worried, irritable, or overwhelmed.

You can support this transition by planning ahead and talking about upcoming changes related to bed/wake up times, chores, start/end of day routines, homework expectations, and after-school activities. In the context of COVID-19, these routines might be different than in past years. As an adult, you might not have all the information you need to help your child or teen make a plan. We suggest talking with your children and teens about what you do and don't know as a starting point. From there, you can work together to create a sense of predictability with new routines and rituals.

If your child will be doing school online, think about a way to symbolize the start and end of the school day. Ideas include moving the computer or covering it with a favorite piece of cloth, ringing a bell or banging a drum, saying a favorite phrase (maybe one that the person who died used to say), or anything else that works for your family.

One of students' biggest back to school concerns is wondering who knows about the death and what details they have. If the death happened over the summer, or if your child is going to a new school, ask what they would like shared with teachers and classmates. Your child's first instinct might be to keep the death private.

Often, children fear being treated differently or being seen as “the kid whose (parent/caregiver/sibling) died.” While it’s important to honor your child’s wishes, talk with them about the challenges of trying to keep the loss a secret. Doing so takes a lot of energy and can limit their ability to be open with friends. Also, when teachers know a child is grieving, they are better equipped to be supportive and understanding. Talk with your child about the power of being able to tell their own story, rather than people finding out in other ways.

Here are a few other general back to school aspects to consider:

### **Address fears and worries while making space for excitement and celebration**

While going to back to school can spark fear and worry for children and teens who are grieving under regular circumstances, they might be particularly intense in the context of COVID-19. Ask your child or teen what they are concerned about and what questions they have. Children and teens might not share the same concerns that you have as an adult, so be open to their responses. You can provide information, ask clarifying questions about what they might need or want, and model ways to manage those fears and worries. Here’s an example: If your child is worried that they will bring the virus home, you can say, *Sounds like you’re worried that you’ll catch the virus at school and bring it home. I sometimes worry*

*about that too when I go to work. When I feel nervous about that I remind myself about the things I can do to keep myself and others safe. I wear my mask, stay six feet away from other*



*people and wash my hands a lot. Do you have other ideas for what helps you feel safe?* It’s also important to let children and teens know it’s okay to feel excited about going back to school, even if school looks very different this year. When children and teens are grieving, they can feel guilty if they have a good day or aren’t always thinking about the person who died. Remind them that having fun doesn’t mean they miss or love the person any less.

### **Acknowledge how cultural expectations and personal experiences impact grief**

How people grieve might look different depending on their age, where they grew up, cultural expectations, religion/spirituality, experiences of racism and/or discrimination, gender norms, and expectations around helping with chores and caring for other people. You and your children might see families in movies or on TV shows grieving very differently than yours, and worry, “Are we doing it wrong?” Talking with your child about how various cultures, generations, families, and even neighborhoods have different ideas about the “right” way to grieve can help them to feel more comfortable with how they experience and express grief.

### **Make a safety plan for difficult days**

Throughout the year, there will be days that are more difficult than others, such as your child’s birthday or the birthday of the person who died, the anniversary of the day someone died, or any event connected to the death such as a diagnosis, hospital stay, or “first and lasts” (e.g. first volleyball tournament since the death, first field trip without the person there to chaperone, etc.).

Talk with your child about what they need when they feel overwhelmed. Then, collaborate with school staff to identify strategies for your child to access that support. If your child is doing online school at home, talk with them and their teacher about a way to signal on the

virtual platform that they need a break or some individual support.

One family used a plan where the student could silently place a pebble on the teacher's desk as a sign that they were going to the office for a short break with a counselor. If your child is at home, you could utilize a similar strategy, finding an object they can use as a signal that they need a break or time to connect with you. Even if your child never implements their difficult day safety plan, it can be reassuring to have one in place.

### **Find ways for children and teens to check in with you or other caregivers**

After a death, children and teens may worry something will happen to other people in their lives. Going the entire school day without a check-in can be a lot to ask, especially in the first few months after a death. Talk with your child and school staff about how they can check in with you or others at certain times throughout the day. This can be as simple as a quick phone call at the school office, a lunch time text, or checking in with you at home between online classes.

### **Make a plan for school routines and after-school activities**

If the person who died was a part of the child's school routine (e.g. pick-up/drop-off, lunch visits, etc.), those times of day can be especially difficult. Ask your child ahead of time about these and talk about the options. Some children will want to keep things as similar as possible, while others may want to try something totally new.

Consider after-school activities that are affected by the death. Is your child used to having a snack and going to the park with their grandmother every day? Did your teen go over to her best friend's house to work on homework? Not knowing what it will be like can

be the hardest part of grief, so work together to come up with an after-school plan. If the after-school plan is different because of COVID-19, make space for your child or teen to grieve these changes, on top of what's already different because the person died. This gives your child a chance to talk about what they will miss and be part of coming up with new alternatives they can look forward to.



### **Address challenges with concentration, organization, fears, and unknowns**

Grief can take a toll on our ability to focus and complete tasks. As one teen shared, *Thinking about my sister's death took up all of my brain space, there wasn't any room left for algebra.* Your child may need additional reminders about assignments and extra time to complete them.

Having trouble with focus and concentration can be exacerbated by the fear and unknowns that come with the pandemic and increased awareness and news coverage of racism and racist violence.

It's helpful to talk with children and teens about the news and media they are engaging with. Invite them to ask you questions or discuss how they are feeling when they watch, read, or hear about the news and the world around them. Having someone they trust to talk with about their fears can help children feel safe and better able to focus on challenging tasks.

### **Make time for recreation, play, and friends**

Students who are grieving still need time for rest, relaxation, and fun. Play is how children, especially young children, process and integrate what is happening in their world. If the person who died was a big part of their play and

fun, it's helpful to be aware that they might be worried about who will do those activities with them now. If your child had a weekend tradition of watching movies or playing video games with their sibling who died, ask if that is something they want to continue to do with someone else or if it feels too painful. Let children know it's okay to keep traditions or change them up completely.

Sometimes a loss can leave a parent or caregiver with significantly less time and financial resources for recreation and play. If this is true, are there people in the community who can help? For many children, knowing they have dedicated time to spend with the adults they care about, no matter the activity, is the most important thing. Sitting down once a day to read a book together, spend time with a pet, play a game after dinner, or have a dance party are great options for connecting.

COVID-19 restrictions might mean your child or teen isn't able to meet-up with the people they turned to for support and fun. While it's not the same, creating opportunities to connect via phone or video chat with extended family members and friends can be helpful.

Depending on your specific community's guidelines, it might be possible for children and teens to connect outside and with appropriate physical distancing.

### **Find ways to take care of yourself**

Research shows that the outcomes of children who are grieving are strongly connected to how their adult caregivers are doing. Self-care is often easier said than done, especially when you are grieving and it feels like one more task on a very long to-do list. Whether it's finding time to be by yourself, connecting with others, exercising, getting enough sleep, being creative, or anything else that brings you ease and comfort, attending to your needs is one of the best ways you can support your child. If you need additional ideas for self and family-care during COVID-19, please see this [Tip Sheet](#).

Returning to school is a significant experience for every student and particularly for those who are grieving. No matter how your child feels about the start of school, we hope these ideas and suggestions will provide you with a good foundation for talking with them about their concerns and finding ways for them to feel supported and understood.



**The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families**

#### **Our Mission**

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

#### **Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources**

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 55,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](http://dougy.org) or [dougybookstore.org](http://dougybookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.