

Intervention in a Suicidal Crisis during COVID-19 for Schools

Tips for teachers, staff, and parents/caregivers

<http://www.heardalliance.org/>

Actions to be taken by Schools and Districts

Outbreaks can be stressful, and everyone reacts differently. Signs of distress can result in [behavioral changes](#) to watch for and monitor in children and adolescents/teens.

- Identify 'at-risk' and/or vulnerable students and check-in with these students regularly.
- Coordinate a plan and designate a qualified school staff member who will schedule an online check-in meeting with identified students of concern.
- Update or create Safety Plans for at-risk youth.
- Use the [My3 app](#) to ensure the student has a Safety Plan on their phone or computer
- Designate a staff member(s) to schedule regular check-in meetings with the known at-risk and/or vulnerable students as needed.
- Provide online education and/or resources for all teachers, families and students about risk factors, warning signs and protective factors for suicide (see resources at end of this document).
- Inform/remind teachers, families and students about additional stresses experienced during this pandemic-- such as increased anxiety and sadness, changes in routines, isolation and decreased socialization of all kinds (teams, dances, clubs, etc.) financial hardships, food insecurity, loss of relationships, loss of important life milestones such as proms and graduations, losses due to illnesses, potential increase in child abuse, etc.
- Provide teachers, families, and students the school resources to reach out to with concerns.
- Provide community resources for teachers, families, and students to reach out to when there is a concern (i.e. primary care, a 911 CIT Officer (Crisis Intervention Trained), County Crisis Line, Crisis Text Line, Trevor line). Inform school community where to find this information such as on school website.
- If/when a student is thought to be High or Extreme Risk (in imminent danger of suicide) while online, teachers/staff must 1) stay on line with the student, and 2) immediately contact (by text or phone) emergency support for the student. This process requires two people, one to stay in contact with the student and one person to contact emergency services (such as school mental health staff or a 911 CIT Officer). Each school must arrange for this system in advance should it be needed. See CRT Contact Information form below.

Forms from the K12 Toolkit to be provided virtually to appropriate personnel

- [Crisis Response Team \(CRT\) Contact Information](#)
- [Student Suicide Risk Assessment Form](#)
- [Concern Form for Elementary Level](#)
- [Suicide Intervention Protocol Flowcharts \(modified as needed\)](#)
- [Intervention in a Suicidal Crisis Checklist](#)
- [Sample Personal Safety Plan including My3 App](#), (so the Safety Plan is placed in the students phone)
- [Sample - Parent Contact Acknowledgement Form](#)
- [Referral, Consent & Follow-Up Form](#)
- [Sample Student Suicide Risk Documentation Form](#)

Resources

[Comprehensive School Suicide Prevention in a Time of Distance Learning from The National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#)

[Telehealth Tips, Zero Suicide](#)

[Implications of COVID-19 for LGBTQ Youth Mental Health and Suicide Prevention](#)

[National Center for School Mental Health \(NCSMH\)](#)

[COVID-19 Resources: School Support](#)

[COVID-19 Resources: Students and Families](#)

[COVID-19 Resources: Mental Health and Stress Management](#)

[Stress-busting Strategies from CA Surgeon General Nadine Burke Harris](#)

[Strategies for Stress and Coping \(CDC\)](#)

[Teen Guide to Mental Health and Wellness \(San Diego County Office of Ed\)](#)

[Making Caring Common Project: Covid-19 Resources for Schools, Families](#)

[Teaching Tolerance: Supporting Students Through Coronavirus; The Importance of Educator Self-Care](#)

[Thriving Schools](#)

[American Foundation Of Suicide Prevention: Mental Health and Covid-19 Resources \(English and Spanish\)](#)

[National Association of School Psychologists: Covid-19 Resource Center: Return to School, Special Education, Crisis and Mental Health for Families and Educators](#)

[Center for Childhood Resilience: Covid-19 and Social Justice Resources](#)

[Child Mind Institute: Supporting Families During Covid-19](#)

[Referral guidelines from KARA \(A Palo Alto-based Grief Support organization\)](#)

[Know the Signs of Suicide campaign:](#)

[HEARD Alliance K12 Toolkit for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention](#)

[HEARD Alliance COVID-19 Resources](#)

[California Surgeon General's Playbook: Stress Relief during COVID-19](#)

[CASEL Cares Initiative](#)

[Education Week](#)

[Kaiser Permanente Resilience in School Environments \(RISE Index\): School Edition](#)

[Center for Childhood Resilience COVID-19 Response Promoting Resilient Families During COVID-19](#)

[School-Based Health Alliance COVID-19 Resources](#)

[Social Emotional Learning Alliance COVID-19 SEL Supports](#)

[UCSF COVID-19 and Climate Crises Mental Health Resources Curated Information](#)

[Wellness Together School Mental Health](#)

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH THE FAMILY

It is important to work with the family of a student who died. They will often appreciate the support of the school community, and their cooperation can be valuable for effective postvention. The principal or a representative of the school should request to visit the family in their home. It may be useful for a pair of representatives to visit together so that they can support one another during the visit. It is important to respect the cultural and religious traditions of the family relate to death, grieving, and funeral ceremonies.

The school representative(s) should:

- Offer the condolences of the school.
- Inquire about funeral arrangements. Ask if the funeral will be private or if the family will allow students to attend.
- Ask if the parents know of any of their child's friends who may be especially upset.
- Provide the parents with information about grief counseling.
- Ask the family if they would like their child's personal belongings returned. These could include belongings found in the student's locker and desk as well as papers and projects they may want to keep.
- Briefly explain to the parents what the school is doing to respond to the death.

GRIEF FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS AFTER a COVID-19 DEATH

"Grief is a Form of Love"; The Center for Complicated Grief
[https:// complicatedgrief.columbia.edu](https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu)

The sudden loss of a student, peer, friend, sibling or relative can be devastating and traumatic. This is true for children and teens as much as for adults. Grieving after such a loss requires support in order to navigate a profoundly changed world. How profoundly one's world is changed is a very individual experience, as is grief in general. Children and adolescents are generally more vulnerable to trauma than adults (National Action Alliance, 2015).

And children grieve differently than adults. They tend to grieve sporadically reflecting their limited maturity (Requarth, 2006, p. 25). A teen will likely "experience reactions similar to those of adults but will have fewer ways to cope" (Requarth, 2006, p. 56). The grief does not end or go away. Rather, when dealt with successfully, it is transformed and integrated into the background of one's life (Center for Complicated Grief). Needs of bereaved children and adolescents after a death (National Action Alliance, 2015)

1. Grief support that is appropriate to the child's age and developmental level,
2. Reassurance that someone will take care of their basic physical and emotional needs,
3. Support for exploring feelings of responsibility and affirmation that they did not cause the death,
4. Opportunities to tell the story of their loss in their own words,
5. Help expressing negative thoughts and feelings,
6. Ongoing support as their cognitive and linguistic development unfolds and their life experience evolves,
7. Recognition that the experience and process of grief will be unique for each child,
8. Effective professional assistance for grief complications.

When a student dies, schools face a particular challenge to identify and support those students who are deeply affected by their loss. Generally, sudden loss to causes shock, confusion or denial and questioning "why"; a roller coaster of emotions - anxiety, panic, numbness, helplessness, anger and guilt to name a few. Though this does not seem to be part of a school's "mission to educate", the disruption caused by such a loss is real and needs to be addressed by schools. When youth are supported, they can eventually come to terms with their loss.

- 1) *You must take care of yourself. (see Self-Care section)*
- 2) *You will learn to cope, but you cannot do this alone*
- 3) *You will survive this*

With these guiding principles in mind, schools can give their students the opportunity to have their grief acknowledged, be encouraged to express their feelings, and given hope that they will get better. "School provides children and teens with a sense of normalcy, reassuring them that life goes on, even in the face of tragedy" (Requarth, 2006, p. 117). It is also important to recognize teachers and staff are impacted by the loss of a student and need support as well. These principles apply to the entire school community.

The Dougy Center offers several tips for helping children and teens after experiencing a loss.

The following are a few:

1. Tell the truth. This allows youth to be open with their questions and concerns.
2. Expect and allow for different emotions and feelings. This allows youth to feel safe and supported in exploring their feelings.
3. Talk openly. This provides a safe place and/or person with whom youth can talk about their questions, concerns, and fears.
4. Talk about and remember the person who died. This helps children share their thoughts and feelings as they work through their grief
5. Be prepared for fears. This is an opportunity to listen to youths' questions and concerns and to offer reassurance without making unrealistic promises.
6. Provide outlets for grieving: play, physical activity, art, etc. This provides the opportunity for adults to reflect back what they see and hear validating a youth's experience and helping them regain a sense of balance and control.
7. Respect differences in grieving styles. Recognizing that each person will grieve in their own way helps clarify and affirm their individual way of grieving.

It is also important to note that grieving sometimes looks like depression. If a child or teen is truly depressed they will exhibit five or more symptoms of clinical depression which will be affecting their daily functioning. "If physical and emotional symptoms seriously impact daily functioning, they should be addressed by a qualified medical professional or counselor" (The Dougy Center).

Resources

1. [National Action Alliance \(2015\) Bereaved Children](#)
2. A Child in Grief—bit.ly/achildingrief—Comprehensive website, from New York Life
3. Foundation Dougy Center—bit.ly/dougygrief—Resource page of the Dougy Center website
4. When Families Grieve—bit.ly/familiesgrief—Lots of resources in various formats for bereaved families and children from Sesame Street
5. National Alliance for Grieving Children—bit.ly/childalliance—Resource page of the website
6. National Child Traumatic Stress Network — bit.ly/childgrieftrauma — Links and information about children affected by trauma
7. NCTSN Caregiver Quick Tips—bit.ly/nctsn tips—Brief, authoritative handouts for helping young children, school-age children, and teens
8. NCTSN Advice for Educators — bit.ly/adviceeducators — Handout to help educators in the aftermath of trauma affecting school populations

Sample Announcements

Sample Announcements for Use with Students After a Death Due to COVID-19

1. After the school's Crisis Response Team has been mobilized, it is critical for administration and/or crisis team members to prepare a statement about the death for release to faculty and students. The announcement should include the facts as they have been officially communicated to the school. Announcements should not overstate or assume facts not in evidence. If the official cause of death has not as yet been ruled, avoid making assumptions.
2. The Crisis Response Team should present the announcement at a meeting of all staff called by the building administrator as soon as possible following the death. The goals of such a meeting are to inform the faculty, acknowledge their grief and loss, and prepare them to respond to the needs of the students. Faculty will then read the announcement to their students in their homerooms (or other small group) so that students get the same information at the same time from someone they know.
3. The sample announcements in this section are straightforward and are designed for use with faculty, students, and parents, as appropriate. Directing your announcement to the grade level of the students is also important, especially in primary or middle schools. A written announcement should be sent home to parents with additional information about common student reactions to loss and grief and how to respond.

Sample Announcement, Day 1

Sample Announcement for When a COVID-19 Death has Occurred, Morning

This morning we heard the extremely sad news that (NAME) has died due to COVID-19. I know we are all saddened by his/her death and send our condolences to his/her family and friends. Crisis stations will be located throughout the school today for students who wish to talk to a counselor. Information about the funeral will be provided when it is available, and students may attend with parental permission.

Sample Announcements, End of Day

At the end of the first day, another announcement to the whole school prior to dismissal can serve to join the whole school in their grieving in a simple, non-sensationalized way. In this case, it is appropriate for the building administrator to make an announcement similar to the following over the loud-speaker:

Today has been a sad day for all of us. We encourage you to talk about (NAME) death with your friends, your family, and whoever else gives you support. We will have special staff here for you tomorrow to help in dealing with our loss. Let us end the day by having the whole school offer a moment of silence for (NAME).

Sample Letter to parents after a death (KARA)

Dear Parents,

A very sad thing has happened in our school community. Last night, we lost (NAME)

This loss was sudden and unexpected, and we are all profoundly saddened by his death. We have shared this information with your children today and had discussions with all the students in their homeroom. Bereavement counselors, teachers, and other support staff have been and will continue to be available to students, teachers, and parents. Please contact the school if you have any questions or concerns.

As a parent, you may want to talk to your child about death because it impacts each person in different ways. How children and teens react will depend on the relationship they had with the person who died, their age, and their prior experience with death.

Your child may:

- *Appear unaffected*
- *Ask questions about the death repeatedly*
- *Be angry or aggressive*
- *Be withdrawn or moody*
- *Be sad or depressed*
- *Become afraid*
- *Have difficulty sleeping or eating*

We suggest that you listen to your children. If they want to talk, answer their questions simply, honestly and be prepared to answer the same questions repeatedly.

Our thoughts are with (family name).

Sincerely,
Principal

"Kara" means to grieve with, to care.
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Palo Alto CA 94301
(650) 321-5272
www.kara-grief.org

SAMPLE GRIEF DISCUSSION WITH STUDENTS

Share facts of the death:

"I have some very sad news to share today. Our (TEACHER, STUDENT, etc.), died due to complications from COVID-19. I am feeling pretty sad and would like to take some time to talk to you about how you are and answer any questions you might have..."

Share the information that you have directly and honestly.

- Ask students if they know what happened. Ask them how they found out. At this point allow them to share what they know or think without correcting them.
- Allow students to ask questions. Answer questions as best you can, knowing that it is okay to say "I don't know" when you don't have the answer.
- Talk to your class about how grief affects people and encourage them to share how they feel. One way to do this is to discuss what other types of losses or deaths the students in your class have experienced, and what helped them cope.
- Let students know that if they would like to write a letter and/or draw a picture to support the family that they could do so.
- Let students and families know that there are support counselors that they can speak with today who can help with on-going support as well.
- Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate(s) to return to school, and how they may help. You can ask your class for ideas about how they would like others to treat them if they were returning to school after a death, pointing out differences in preferences such as:
 - Some grieving students might like to be left alone while others may want the circumstances discussed freely.
 - Some grieving students may want everyone to treat them the same way they treated them before. These students typically don't like people being "extra nice".
 - Other grieving students may say they don't want to be in the spotlight, but they may also feel like they don't want people acting like nothing happened.

Provide a way for your class to reach out to the grieving classmate and his other family. One of the ways that students can reach out is by sending cards or pictures to the child and family, letting them know the class is thinking of them. If students in your class knew the person who died, they could share memories of that person.

Resource from KARA: *Moving through Grief Toward Hope and Meaning*, www.kara-grief.org

For questions or comments regarding this document, please contact Ivan Rodriguez at ivan3@stanford.edu