


## Chapter 6

# Children Grieve Too: Offering School–Based Bereavement Support Groups

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Children represent an often-forgotten group of mourners. Helping professionals must be cautious about making assumptions regarding the inherent resilience of children. Moreover, helping professionals need to avoid minimizing the deleterious effects of grief on young clients. Grief impacts all children differently. Because children's grief often manifests differently than adults' grief, bereaved children can go underassessed and undertreated. Grief support groups in local school settings can be an efficacious way of supporting bereaved youth. The facilitative nature of peer support can promote healing through elements of universality and shared experiences. Due to their developmental level, students may benefit from knowing a fellow student has navigated something similar. In this chapter, the authors detail a grief support group model for mental health professionals tending to the unique mental health needs of bereaved youth.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Over 7.3% of children experience the death of a parent or sibling by the age of 18 (Burns et al., 2020). According to the Judith Ann Griesse (JAG) institute, one in twelve U.S. children will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18. If there are 24 children in a kindergarten class, two of them will lose a parent or sibling by the time they turn 18 (Burns et al., 2020). Importantly, the bulk of the statistics only emphasize children who experience parent or sibling loss, not accounting for the grief experiences of children navigating other types of loss. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to the impact of childhood bereavement. More than one million COVID-19 deaths in the United States include parents, grandparents, and other caregivers for children (Treglia et al., 2023). BIPOC children were more than twice as likely as White children to experience caregiver loss (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

The support group model provided in this chapter will highlight the benefits of offering support groups for grieving children within a school setting for school counselors, school-based counselors, and counselors who collaborate with local school districts. We provide practical and applicable strategies for helping professionals working with grieving individuals in earlier stages of development. The group curriculum will highlight the unique challenges and symptoms of younger elementary aged children and older elementary aged children. An intervention will be provided that is applicable to each age group. This chapter is unique in that it provides concrete suggestions and although research has been done on childhood bereavement support groups, this book chapter sought to provide applicable and accessible strategies for mental health professionals. Consequently, this chapter seeks to bridge the gap between research and clinical practice.

## **UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENT GRIEVERS**

The loss of a loved one, especially a parent or other caregiver, is a significant moment in a child's life. Although many bereaved children exhibit resiliency, children who experience bereavement are at higher for mental health diagnoses like depression, anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse disorders, and suicidality if they are not provided with adequate support and early intervention (Linder et al., 2024; Treglia, 2023). Children from marginalized communities are at higher risk for poor outcomes including post-traumatic stress symptoms, stress and anxiety, and a lack of access to mental health support (Treglia et al., 2023).

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