



# Supporting Students with Absent Caregivers

Educators may know of students who have experienced the death of a parent/caregiver, although some families choose not to share that information with the school. However, it is not possible to know all the losses facing every student. Children who have family members who are not living with or active in their families, such as due to deployment, divorce/separation, foster care placement, deportation, or incarceration may be experiencing fear about their future, sadness about the time lost with them, and grief if reunification does not seem possible.

The following steps help create a more positive learning environment for students across a range of circumstances.

1. Reach out to students you know have lost or are separated from a parent/caregiver. Older children and youth may not be ready to talk when you first offer to speak with them. They may prefer time alone or talking with their friends. They may say they do not need or wish to talk, even when they are feeling overwhelmed. Don't try to force the conversation. Wait for them to accept your invitation. Acknowledge that this can be difficult to discuss and let them know that children and adults often find it helpful to talk about their feelings. Help them identify other adults with whom they can speak when they are ready. This might be a guidance counselor or mental health provider in the school, someone in their extended family, or another trusted adult in the community. Remain available and supportive and continue to offer to talk from time to time. The Coalition module on [Talking with Children](#) will demonstrate how to approach these conversations.
2. Introduce classroom activities thoughtfully. Keep the focus of any instructions broad enough to include all these students. For example: "Tomorrow we're going to do an activity for Father's Day where I ask you to focus on your fathers. Some of you may not have a father who is alive or currently living with you. You can focus on your memories of your father or pick another man who has been supportive and important to you. This might be someone you're close to now, or someone who has been important to you in the past." Be sure to adapt the activity if necessary to keep it inclusive (e.g., revise templates with "Dad" or "Father" on them). Approach students you know may have difficulty with an activity privately before introducing the activity to the class. Let them know what you're planning. Check to see if they want to participate or would prefer an alternative. Tell them you will not call on them to share their work with the class, though they can volunteer if they wish. The Coalition to Support Grieving Students has a guidance document on how [Father's Day may not be easy for some students](#).
3. Understand grief and [grief triggers](#) and have a plan. Many different events in school can trigger a grief response. The response might be mild and brief, or intense and troubling to a student. When necessary, help students find a safe place to experience powerful feelings and regain their composure (counselor or nurse office, library, a moment in the hallway).
4. Understand that children experience [secondary losses](#) as the result of their loss of contact with their parent/caregiver including changes in relationships, schools, family finances and lifestyle. Grieving children mourn not only the loss of the person who is no longer with them but these associated secondary losses.

These simple steps can make a genuine difference for grieving students.