

When a Student Loses a Parent to COVID-19

Guidelines to accompany the video

Those of you in the hot spots are facing indescribably more difficult issues because for many of you, although your family is sheltering at home, you have loved ones on the front lines as police officers, medical professionals or other essential duties. So you're worried about your own families, living in the midst of this, and now you have a student from your school who has sustained the loss of a family member. Even in the best of times, even if you didn't have to worry about your own family's well-being, to try to provide comfort over video calls falls so far short of what you want to be able to do. Then add to that, you don't have your usual resilience to bring to the effort. We're already exhausted we have such a long journey ahead of us.

As I listened to your stories on our Zoom calls and heard that we already have students who have lost both parents and students who are home alone with one sick parent, it was heartening that we could talk about helpful ways you might approach that call.

First off, think about having several people the student knows in on the call. You don't need to do these alone; it will be much easier if there are three or so from the school who can alternate talking with the child. This is a powerful message to the student. The message is, "It isn't just the counselor who is checking in on me, my whole school community cares about me."

If all from the school who are going to be on the call can have the list of questions/statements printed ahead of time, you can each ask whatever feels right for you in a random order. Read through all of this to make shared plans before you make the call.

A few thoughts for starting the conversation... it is a bit of a conversation stopper to simply say, "I'm so sorry your dad died." The rest of that might be talking about how hard that is and how awful they must feel. It is a bit of a conversation stopper, and it puts the student on the spot to

relate their side of things at the very outset. So let's look at some other starting places. Perhaps instead, try some of these, phrasing them at the developmental level of the child:

- None of us could have guessed that something like this was going to happen.
- What is happening now is not like anything that has ever happened for us before, so it is hard to even know what to say. We all wondered what we could do that would help, and we're not sure, so we thought we'd just start with this call.
- It was just so important to all of us that we connect with you and let you know how much we have been thinking about you (or praying for you). We all wish we could just come to you right now and be there with you. But at least we can do this.

You might talk about others who send their well wishes:

- I spoke with ___ from the school and she send her love/prayers/thoughts to you.

As you go through this, allow silent pauses. Don't fill all the time with words. Give the child time to take it in. Sometimes, kids will just begin to talk and you can follow them in their direction. But if not, you might inquire about their current situation:

- Who all is in the home where you are now? Who can you be with?

Before you call, you might go online and order something to be sent to them... a new stuffie is great for younger kids, but it is surprising how, in the Safe Rooms after a friend's death, even high school kids pick up the teddy bears. Or you could purchase those mandala coloring books, which are a really helpful way for kids to put their brains into neutral for awhile. If you've done that, you could tell them in the call.

- Because I can't come over to see you, I wanted to send you ____, so I ordered that to be delivered. Remember, you have to do safe steps before opening the package, like leave it untouched for two or three days, or spray it with disinfectant... remember whatever is

inside might have to sit untouched for a few days or be sanitized as well. (You might make a comment about how even teddy bears have to quarantine for a few days.)

Now you might go into the concerns and how to help.

- We tried to think of what might help you the most right now, and we just don't know. We're really hoping you can tell us what one thing is that any of us could do that would make a difference for you. (Be sure to give lots of reflection time for the student. This is probably the first time s/he has tried to find words for any of this.)

You might ask about how/whether s/he's connecting with friends:

- Have you had any contact with your friends on the phone?
- Sometimes that might be really helpful, but also if your friends have never lost someone, they might not know how to support you right now. Are there friends who are comforting for you?
- Are there other adults you'd like to be in touch with?

If you've been able to get this far in the conversation, you can probably keep going with whatever the student brings up.

When you feel ready to wrap up the call, some possibilities might be:

- I am so glad that we could make this call happen, and that all of us could be on it.
- Would you like us to set up another call? When, etc.
- Who from the school would you like us to invite in the future?
- Who do you have that you can text or call when you really need someone when things are really difficult?
- What about in the middle of the night?
- How will we know what you need next?

Help problem-solve those last few questions if the student needs more contact people

Additional things you may do:

- If they seem to have a process for keeping safe by quarantining or disinfecting mail, you might send them messages in the mail. Safer might be to take selfies of yourself waving to the student and send one every few hours.
- “Sending hugs” or “Thinking of you right this minute” texts during the day