

Micki Burns: If school nurses are attentive, empathic and compassionate, I believe that students and families will come to know that they're a safe person for them to go to and a person who they can be honest with about their grief reactions.

Speaker 2: As a content warning. This episode of School Nurse Chat discusses childhood grief and bereavement. For more information on this topic, visit www.judishouse.org.

Donna Mazyck: Hello, I'm Donna Mazyck, Executive Director of the National Association of School Nurses. Welcome to School Nurse Chat. Today, we're talking about childhood grief and grieving over the holidays. We have two guests with us today and I'll introduce them after sharing a little bit about how NASN has approached this topic.

The National Association of School Nurses is a founding member of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students. The coalition was created to serve as a resource, primarily web-based, for school staff and educators in K through 12 schools. It's an interdisciplinary approach to provide education and training for school staff in order to support students who are grieving. Well, now we'll turn to our experts. I want to introduce Michaelleen Burns. Michaelleen is the Chief Clinical Officer of Judi's House and JAG Institute, which is a comprehensive child and family bereavement center in Denver, Colorado. She's a licensed psychologist with more than 18 years experience providing assessment and therapeutic support to families facing adversity.

Dr. Burns is Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. In her work, she has witnessed the lasting negative impact of unaddressed grief. She's also dedicated to ensuring that appropriate care is available for all and raising childhood bereavement to a level of critical public importance. Dr. Burns oversees Judi's House and the JAG institutes core initiatives, which are direct service, evaluation and research and training and education. And all of that works towards the organization's vision that no child should be alone in their grief. Welcome, Dr. Burns.

Micki Burns: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here, Donna, and please refer to me as as Micki.

Donna Mazyck: And our next guest is Elizabeth McDermott. Ms. McDermott has been the school nurse at Georgetown Day School in Washington DC for 21 years. She has served as President of the NASN DC affiliate, and she's served on the NASN board of directors. Prior to becoming a school nurse, Ms. McDermott spent eight years working in labor and delivery. And while working in labor and delivery, she obtained her certification in grief counseling and oversaw the hospital's perinatal grief program. Welcome.

Elizabeth McDer...: Happy to be here.

Donna Mazyck: Micki, I'll give you the first question. How common is grief in childhood, specifically the loss of a parent or a primary caregiver?

Micki Burns: When we started out at Judi's House wanting to get into helping children who are grieving find connection and healing, one of the first questions we asked ourselves was, how many children are grieving? And so, we developed a model called the childhood bereavement estimation model, and that tells us that one in 14 children in the US will experience the death of a parent or a sibling by their 18th birthday. And I know that you asked specifically about death of a parent. One in 17 children will experience the death of a parent by their 18th birthday.

And since I know we're talking to school nurses today, when you think about the size of an average classroom, that means that there's probably only one student in every classroom, so being able to find connection can be really difficult when you're feeling all alone and like no one can understand what you're going through. What that model tells us is that currently about two million children in the US are grieving the death of a parent, so it's probably more prevalent than some people think.

Donna Mazyck: And then certainly, two million is a lot larger number than I think we have thought about in terms of childhood grief. How do you see COVID-19 further impacting students who are also grieving the loss of a parent or a sibling?

Micki Burns: Grief is already really complicated and messy and the COVID-19 crisis has just exacerbated the complexity of grief for bereaved families. In many ways, the ways we traditionally cope, they just aren't readily available to us. What we know is that families of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 for a multitude of reasons, including discriminatory healthcare practices and over representation in what we now call essential services. I don't think some of the things that qualify as essential are things we would have thought about in January 2020. And a lot of families, where the jobs that their caregivers have, don't allow them to work from home. And so, they're having to go out and with the numbers as high as they are right now, that's a really scary prospect for a family and for children. So what we know is that when we look at how COVID-19 is complicating things for grieving families, it varies.

We reached out to all of our families this summer to ask them how they were doing in the midst of the pandemic. Some of them shared that they were finding that the restrictions were allowing them to connect in a whole new way. They were talking about their grief and in approach that they never had before. They were having open conversation and dialogue that when they were normally running around and going from place to place, they never made the space for. While others shared with us that the restrictions and having to be at home was really complicating their grief even more. They weren't able to get together with family or relatives who really help them to feel connected. And so, I think when we think about how is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting families, we really have to look at each family's unique experience and reach out to them and ask, what

is it that's going on for you specifically? And what is it that you need to be able to manage this incredibly stressful time that we're all experiencing?

Donna Mazyck: That's really helpful, Micki. With COVID or without COVID, grief is such a unique experience and journey for people. And it's interesting that you're reaching out, provided that information, that it's still unique, even within the midst of a pandemic.

Micki Burns: While some of the families told us that the COVID-19 pandemic has actually created a greater level of understanding in their community, because everybody's grieving. As you said, we're all missing things. We're missing graduations, weddings, we're missing the holidays and get togethers. So for some families that has actually created more understanding among their peers, that people know what it's like to lose something and to miss that. And then again, another family shared that for them, the comparison of missing a graduation to having an empty chair at the table at Thanksgiving really felt dismissive of their grief. So the pandemic definitely hasn't made grieving any more straightforward.

Donna Mazyck: I'm going to ask this question to both of you. I'll start with you, Elizabeth. Are you aware of the response of grieving students to the isolation of virtual instruction or even the return to school during this time that's so challenging for us all?

Elizabeth McDer...: I think Micki actually spoke to this a little bit in her last response. Just as there's a normal continuum for grief, we're also seeing a continuum of responses to virtual instruction. And for some kids who are grieving, I think this is probably helpful, as she said, for them to be home, to be surrounded by loved ones, to have the time and the space to grieve as they need to. And for other kids, they're missing out on the extra support that schools provide, the support that friends provide. They would benefit, I think, a lot from having a little more routine in their lives, more distraction. So I think there's a huge continuum of responses.

With regard to kids coming back to school. My students are back in school and I have definitely, in my children who are experiencing grief, seen an increase in separation anxiety. I think it's harder for some of these kids to leave home, right? They've lost someone and they don't want to leave the people that are remaining in their lives. So I've seen an increase in separation anxiety. I've seen an increase in difficulty concentrating, which goes along with grief. And increased somatization, which for a school nurse is really difficult right now, because the things we see, stomach aches, headaches, diarrhea, that are often associated with anxiety, with stress, with grief, are the very things we're being told to send children home from school for.

So, we are not able to weed out as easily, what is somatic and what is not, because we are having to send these kids home. So this is a discussion that I've been having with parents, before kids come back to school, so that we have kind

of talked through how this may work if their children end up in my office with some of these symptoms.

Donna Mazyck: Great way to be proactive with that, Elizabeth. Micki, did you have anything to add in terms of the response of grieving students to the isolation of virtual instruction or even returning to school?

Micki Burns: I really appreciate everything that Elizabeth said, especially in talking about those somatic symptoms that are so common with grief. I think the one thing that I would add that we're seeing in communities where kids are learning virtually, is that we're missing out on that opportunity to see kids. And so, school nurses, teachers, school counselors, they would see kids on a daily basis.

And so, if you had a child who you know had experienced a loss and you started to see changes in the way they were presenting, so maybe they were looking more disheveled or maybe they were looking pale, being able to see that on a daily basis and intervene and ask questions, that has been taken away in some respects with the virtual learning. And so, we know that we don't have as many eyes on kids, and that is a lot of the ways that we protect kids in this environment, is our school professionals are people who are looking out for them every day. And that's definitely limited in our virtual environment.

Donna Mazyck: Yeah, it is a good point and something to keep in mind. Micki, I want to talk about the holiday season that's upon us and wondering what considerations for school nurses do you have to positively impact students and families before they have their holiday break time?

Micki Burns: When you're grieving, the holidays are difficult regardless. And usually one of the ways that we manage that is by being with family to fill the void. But this year that's really not possible for many of us. And it may leave children stuck at home in a place where there are more reminders of the person who died, but again, not having as many outlets for being able to cope with those feelings that it brings up. And so, as we look at this, holiday season, and again, we take into consideration all those reasons why it might look different for kids this year from the COVID related restrictions to having a caregiver who's maybe unemployed now or under employed now, we know that school nurses can have a positive impact by first acknowledging for kids that this year is really different.

That that difference is creating stress. And it's not just creating stress for the student, it's creating stress in their family and it's creating stress in their support network. So even the people who we usually turn to for help, we're all living in this kind of soft trauma being in this COVID-19. So first, just recognizing that difference. And then I think second, incorporating additional questions into what you ask students when they do come to you, whether that's virtually or in person, to really kind of ask them about how things are different for them. Not just because of the loss that they've experienced, but because of the current times and how things are going. And then finally, to connect that student to

resources in the school that can be supportive. I think school nurses have to be some of the most resourceful people that we have, because they have to be aware of all these different ways to meet kids' needs.

When Elizabeth was talking about, being able to kind of figure out with the kid, is this a somatic symptom, or is this something other than grief? You all are kind of our reference librarians in how to support kids and so just being able to kind of get them directed to the resources that they need to be able to manage the grief and the COVID-19 pandemic a little better.

Donna Mazyck: That's a great opening for you, Elizabeth, to even talk about school nurses' support for grieving students during the school day, when that in-person education has resumed, you're there. You're there now. Can you give some examples of strategies that have worked?

Elizabeth McDer...: Well, one of the things that I do is to reach out before the child even comes back to school. And I often, if I learn about a child who's lost a loved one, whether it be a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, I usually send the child a card right away. And depending on whether I know this particular person, I may talk about some anecdote, "I remember when dad came to pick you up and we had that great conversation about carrot cake or baseball," or whatever it was, or "I'm so glad I got to meet grandma Edna when she came to grandparents day last year." But I reach out, I name the person. I let the child know that I'm thinking about this person too. Make myself approachable.

If I don't know the person, I may just say to them, "I hope that you'll feel comfortable stopping by my office, when you get back. I'd love to hear more about this person in your life." Even if somebody's lost someone early in the pandemic, I know a lot of schools have been out since March. The holidays are a good time to reach out to families, as Micki said, this is a time when people feel loss, especially deeply, and they have not forgotten about this loved one. So it's fine to reach out months later and let this child know that you are thinking about them, that you are thinking about their loved one and it's a good excuse to send a card.

I also work to prep teachers before kids come back, to let them know what to expect, how this child may present, what things would trigger us to be concerned and to refer this child to the counselor or to outside counseling. I often refer our staff members to the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, which you mentioned early on in the program, because they have wonderful resources and I'm really excited to learn more about Judi's House and the resources that they offer today too.

So those are some of the things that I do before a child even walks into the building. And I think that that's really important to support the kids before they come in. Some kids want to talk, some kids don't want to talk and those are both okay. But I always let them know that I'm there and just try to touch base

with them when they first get back, just to be a presence so that they know that I'm someone that they can come to.

Speaker 2: The National Association of School Nurses is a founding member of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students. Find videos and resources for schools at grievingstudents.org.

Donna Mazyck: You mentioned, Elizabeth, making yourself approachable, so that says a lot. So, Micki, I've got just a few questions kind of wrapped up in one statement. So I'm going to just give them all to you. Just asking, how would you recommend that school nurses respond to the difficult conversations with surviving caregivers in terms of addressing emotional needs of students?

We know that often grieving students will find their ways to that approachable school nurse and that office for emotional support. How do school nurses determine when students may need to be referred or to speak to a school counselor or school psychologist, or even in some cases, be sent home for the day or refer to community counseling support? Do you recommend a plan of care, how would the school nurse approach that?

Micki Burns: Those are a lot of questions, Donna, I'll try to break them down, but if I miss anything, you certainly let me know. First of all, I'd just like to say, thank you to Elizabeth. What you just outlined as a response to a child who has had a loss is exactly what we would want to happen. And so, thank you and thanks to all the school nurses who are listening. You all see so many of the social and emotional issues that students face, because as you both pointed out, the stigma in our society for students who are grieving or facing any sort of mental health issue, means that it's sometimes a lot easier to walk into the school nurse's office than it is to walk into the school counselor's office. So you all are on the front lines for us.

When the questions are coming from the surviving caregiver, I think, again, I heard Elizabeth say this, using that team approach whenever it's possible is going to be the best strategy. So involving the classroom teacher, bringing in the mental health supports who are available, and if there's some important administrators in the school, letting them be part of the conversation. That really lets the family know that you recognize the level of difficulty of the situation that they're going through and that you want to respond in a comprehensive way. At Judi's House, unfortunately, when we see families, they tend to be more likely to tell us about the experiences that they had that weren't positive than the ones that were, because that's just how we are as people. There's a psychologist named Rick Hanson, who says our minds are Teflon for the good and Velcro for the bad. But if you can create that team-based approach where everybody's aware of what's going on for the child and everybody's paying attention, I think that's a great way to respond to the caregiver, letting them know we're all in this with you.

And then I think when you have this student in your office, you want to pay attention to their help seeking history. So is this their first time in your office? And if it's not, has there been a pattern to their visits? Like, are they coming in every Tuesday at 11 or does it happen to always be that they're coming in when it's their English Lit class? If it is their first visit, our recommendation would be to just respect that the child's advocating for themselves and trust that their report of what's going on for them and what they need to manage it, is true for them in that moment. Feeling heard and respected by a caring adult really, really goes a long way for kids. We know that that can be the meaning maker for them in a lot of situations.

And then once you've had a chance to hear them out, alerting the school mental health professionals so that you can begin pulling that team together, if this is the first time that they're coming to you. And then if there is a pattern, asking about it. "It seems like you aren't feeling well during an English Lit class every week, what's going on there? Is there something significant here?" You might learn that this class is reading a book that's about loss and it's really bringing up some difficult emotions for them. Or you might learn that their loved one died on a Tuesday and so they just really, every Tuesday, been re-experiencing some of the story and the experience that they had. And so, being able to ask these questions and then again, bring it back to this team that hopefully you have in your school community, to not only support the student, but also to support each other so that you can help get the kid back to the classroom and back to learning. I think those are some of the suggestions and recommendations that we would make.

Donna Mazyck: Elizabeth, in your experience, after a loss, how can families and school nurses help a student transition back into school?

Elizabeth McDer...: I think this goes back to the team response again, and involving the family and letting the child know that you are working closely with their family and that you are a team. I also think it's important to have children help identify who their support people are in schools, because we often, schools jump to the school nurse, the school counselor, the homeroom teacher and sometimes those are absolutely appropriate people. But I think especially during this age of virtual learning right now, I'm hearing from a lot of teachers that they are having trouble connecting with the kids like they have when they have them in the classroom. I know I have felt that way this year. I don't have the daily interactions with the kids or haven't until recently.

So I think it's really important, especially now, to have kids help identify who the people are they feel comfortable going to at school if they need to talk to somebody, if they have worries or concerns. And it may be last year's teacher, it may be the custodian or the lady in the cafeteria, but somebody that child is connected to. And I usually have kids identify a number of people, because sometimes people are not in a position to provide that kind of support, because of their own grieving or they're just not comfortable having those conversations. But those are two things that I do, is to really let the child know

that I am partnering with their family and to help the child determine who their support system is going to be when they come back to school.

Donna Mazyck: Those are great tips for that preparation. And then, sometimes with the plan, some obstacles might arise, so how might you foresee for students, these obstacles as they return to school? How do you approach just addressing them?

Elizabeth McDer...: Well, I think Micki referred to this early on, and I think lot of times we don't, we're thinking about the child in grief and the parents in grief and don't think about some of the logistical obstacles that kids face when they come back after the loss of a loved one, especially if it's somebody who's been living in their immediate family, whether it be a parent, a grandparent, caregiver. We need to look at who drove this child to school. Does this child need assistance for transportation now? Have the finances changed? Is this child now going to qualify for free and reduced lunch? And that's something that we can become involved in helping. Who helps this child with homework at home?

And it may be that it's the parent who is still there, but they now have taken on a whole nother role. And they're working and assuming two parenting roles and may not have the time to do the amount of homework help they had. So sometimes we may be arranging extra homework help for the child at school or having them come to the afterschool program. So I think there's a lot of logistical obstacles that are not necessarily thought of when there's a loss in the family. And these are things that nurses can be helpful in arranging.

Donna Mazyck: Micki, many community providers such as Judi's House are expanding services to virtual formats in this time that we're in. How does a student and family access virtual grief support and what suggestions do you have for school nurses across the nation and even globally?

Micki Burns: I'm so glad you asked this question, Donna. When the pandemic really hit home back in March, a collection of grief centers that come together called The National Alliance for Grieving Children, quickly started meeting on a weekly basis to share best practices and talk about how we were going to continue to meet the needs of the millions of grieving children who are out there, despite the fact that we couldn't get together in the ways that we had traditionally done so. And almost all of the organizations pivoted to the virtual environment, just like schools had to. A lot of those services are available locally. And so, I want to offer two resources to the listeners, both The National Alliance for Grieving Children and the Eluna Foundation have national directories and some international directories for resources in their community of people who are providing this kind of support.

So that would be two places where you could go to find out if there's a grief care provider in your community. And if you don't see something, the Eluna Foundation has a hotline number that you can call and they will work with you to help find resources that you can access even if there's not anything there. The other resource that would highlight is available through Judi's House. Our

community-based care team developed virtual workshops for students and for school professionals. The student workshops are 20 to 45 minutes and developmentally tailored to students grades K through 12, whether they're grieving or not.

So our grief experts virtually come into the classroom and they have a little curriculum that they offer and ask some follow up questions to really open up the conversation about grief among the students and then we can provide ongoing consultation with that. And then our professional workshops are for any school personnel, just talking a little bit more, getting a little more in-depth about grief, and we can provide those workshops, either of those in Spanish or English, anywhere, thanks to our virtual environment. So anyone who's interested in that, they can go to our website and learn more about how to bring a little piece of Judi's House to your community.

Donna Mazyck: I couldn't help but think of the population based approach in that virtual workshop you do with classrooms of students. Some of them don't know what grief is and this way they get to learn and it actually helps a whole population of students know what this is all about.

Micki Burns: We've had some really remarkable learnings through that. So yes, thank you, Donna, for pointing that out.

Donna Mazyck: So, Elizabeth, what is the ways school nurses can recognize and attend to their own personal grief needs this holiday season? We're hearing a lot about resilience and how school nurses can take care of themselves. What are your thoughts?

Elizabeth McDer...: I think the first thing that school nurses need to do is learn how to say no. I mean, we're caregivers by nature, that's why we do what we do. And I think so many of us want to jump in and help with everything and save the world. And I think we really need to learn self care, just like when you're on an airplane and they say, "Put the oxygen mask on yourself, before everyone else." That we need to learn to care for ourselves as much as we care for other people.

Getting enough rest, getting exercise, eating healthy, finding something that brings you joy and devoting some time each day towards doing it. And I also think it's really important for school nurses to develop contacts among other school nurses, because we're really in a unique position in a school community in that we're kind of the lone wolf there. In most schools, there's a nurse and we have to keep what we do confidential, so we can't just run into the teacher's lounge and let it all out to whoever's in there. So I think it's really important to develop contacts with other nurses and whether that's through NASN and the listservs or calling the school down the street from you and talking to the nurse there. I just, I personally find those connections that I make with other school nurses who really understand what I'm doing and what I'm going through, so valuable in helping me emotionally.

Donna Mazyck: Micki, how do you recommend that school nurses reinforce to families that the student will be okay?

Micki Burns: What we know about how people heal through grief is they allow themselves to experience the grief. And our natural human tendency is to avoid discomfort. And so, when somebody is healing, it often looks like they're hurting. They are hurting and our tendency is to want to fix it, like take it away. And so, I think if we can allow people to know, "It's okay to grieve and I'm going to sit by you, I'm going to be with you as you go through it," then they can start to move through that process in a way that's helpful. If school nurses are attentive, empathic and compassionate, I believe that students and families will come to know that they're a safe person for them to go to and a person who they can be honest with about their grief reactions.

None of us have all the answers, but when we walk alongside someone and listen to their struggle and we recruit the other supports that we need, we'll all become part of that healing community for that child and that family.

Donna Mazyck: Well, thank you. On that note, I'd like to thank you Micki for being with us. Thank you, Elizabeth. You've given such rich information and actionable topics that school nurses can put into place to help their students who are grieving and to help their families as well. Thank you for being here today.

Micki Burns: Thank you, Donna. It's truly been a pleasure to be here and I look forward to continuing to work with the school nurses nationwide.

Elizabeth McDer...: Thank you, Donna. I really appreciate being asked to be here today and thank you, Micki, I learned a lot myself today from you.

Donna Mazyck: What I'd like to do is again, mention the Coalition to Support Grieving Students. You can find those resources at grievingstudents.org. Thank you for tuning in to School Nurse Chat. We hope you've learned something that you can take away from this time and put into action in your school nurse practice. Thank you for being with us.

Speaker 2: Judi's House JAG Institute is a nonprofit family bereavement center located in Denver, Colorado, that provides safe space for grieving youth ages three to 25 and for their families to receive compassionate and effective support. Judi's house JAG Institute invest in direct service, training and research to fulfill their vision that no child should be alone in grief.