

Loss, COVID & Families

INTRODUCTION

We are facing a quiet epidemic of grief in children. More than 140,000 children lost someone close to them due to a COVID-related death in this country. Many more were unable to attend graduations, proms and other rites of passage. While most bereaved children can do well from adult support alone, children with mental health needs are at greater risk.

SURVEY BACKGROUND

PPAL surveyed families in February 2022 about loss and grief. The impact of COVID-19 has been particularly disruptive to families whose children have mental health needs. Families noted the impact of loss and grief on their children. They reported an increase or change in their child's behaviors such as separation anxiety, withdrawal, numbness or trouble sleeping.

RESPONDENTS

- **243** families raising children ages 6-26 years
- **65%** had children with emotional/behavioral health needs
- **27%** had children with special health care needs; **22%** had both health care & emotional/behavioral needs
- **79%** identified as White and **21%** were families of color
- **80%** said their child had mental health needs before COVID

NEEDS AND GAPS

I think kids are going to need a way (heck, maybe all of us will need ways) to process the effects of the pandemic, as a whole. Eventually, we'll feel like we've left the crises of it and we'll need to process that whole period; incorporate it into who we are.

Having access to mental and behavioral health supports just as easily as if I needed help for a heart attack. There's no access anywhere. Long waits, no people doing the services and huge judgment... The entire society placed physical health above anything else... We once again proved that there is no parity of mental and physical health.

The Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) is a statewide family organization dedicated to improving the mental health and well being of children, youth and families through education, advocacy and partnership. <https://ppal.net/>

What did loss look like for children?

LOSS OF FAMILY AND CLOSE FRIENDS

Lost someone	59%
Close family member very sick from COVID	18%
Close family member was very sick but it was not COVID	12%
Loss of pet	12%

59% reported their child lost at least 1 person during the last 2 years.

62% of those lost were either a family member or close friend. This included parents, grandparents, siblings, family friends, teachers and more.

LOSS OF EXPERIENCES

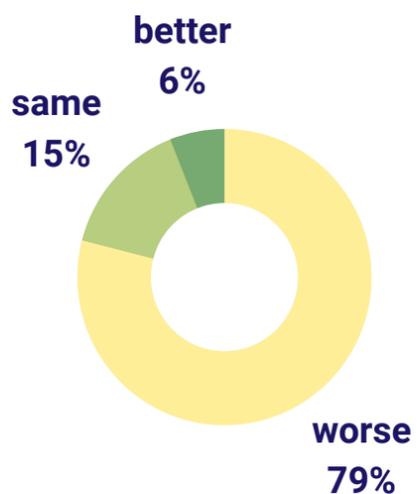
Experiences lost causing children to feel the most sadness, loss or grief:

- **64%** after school and weekend activities like sports, scouts, plays and social groups
- **56%** birthday and holiday celebrations
- Others: lost routines, family gatherings and in-person connections

“He already had extremely limited educational and social opportunities and missed what otherwise would have been available to him in that services shut down so more isolated than ever before.”

BEHAVIORS WORSENERD FOR MOST CHILDREN

- **79%** reported their child’s behaviors got somewhat or a lot worse
- **44%** children lost ground or became more immature



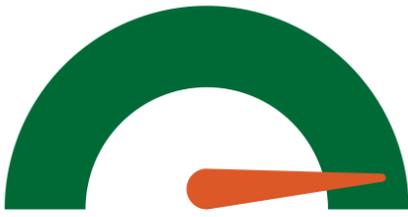
TOP 5 WAYS EXPRESSED THEIR LOSS

- **66%** increased anxiety
- **54%** increased anger or irritability
- **40%** increased depression
- **23%** trouble sleeping
- **23%** more withdrawn or numb

“My son lost opportunities for peer socialization, education, and any connection outside his parents.”

My child did not receive the in-home and educational supports needed.”

What did loss look like for caregivers?

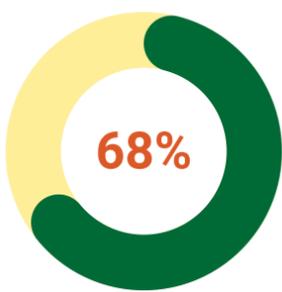


95% of caregivers reported sadness and disappointment because of the important experiences their children missed out on.

LOCKDOWN WAS MORE ABOUT LOSS THAN ISOLATION

Caregiver Losses

Caregivers, like their children, reported staggering levels of sickness and loss. **68%** reported losing someone.



- **64%** of those lost were family members and close friends
- **23%** close family member very sick from COVID
- **21%** close family member was very sick but it was not COVID

Top Challenges for Caregivers

Personal experiences took a toll on caregivers, causing feelings of loss, sadness or grief.

“As the only caregiver to my son my mental health declined to the point that I entered into a partial patient program for psych support for myself because I began to feel hopeless and was suffering from anorexia.”

Top 3 Challenges



Economic Strains Reported at High Levels

- **20%** reduced hours/income at work
- **19%** loss of job
- **8%** had to move out of our home

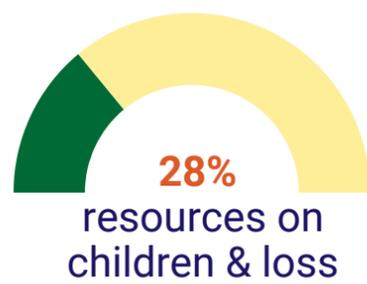
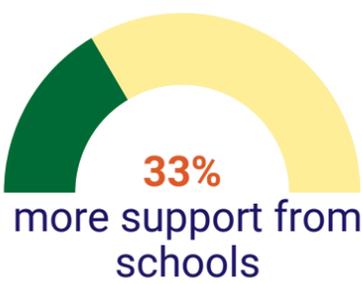
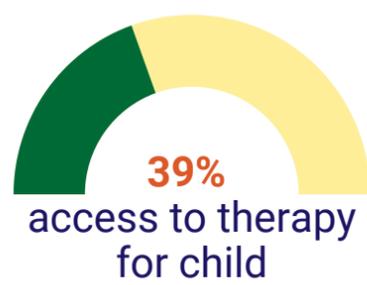
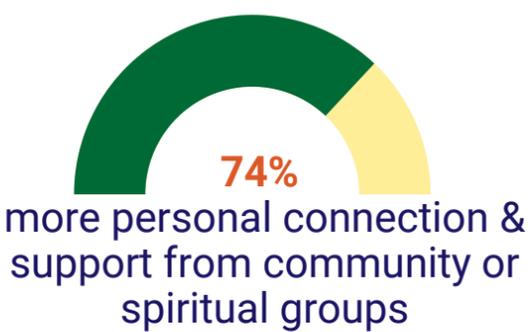
FAMILIES OF COLOR FACED GREATER BURDENS

	Black + Hispanic	White
Severe illness of immediate family/close family friend	59%	41%
My own health challenges	59%	44%
Job reduced hours/income	44%	17%

Grief-Informed Parenting: What would help?

Parenting children with behavioral health challenges was the norm for the 243 survey respondents. COVID added another layer of stress. 79% had behavioral health challenges before the pandemic. Another 12% of the children developed behavioral health challenges during COVID. Families reported that during COVID, behavioral health worsened for 79% of the children and 44% lost ground or became more immature.

WHAT COULD HAVE HELPED SUPPORT CAREGIVERS?



CAREGIVERS RELIED ON NON-CLINICAL SUPPORTS

Caregivers found themselves parenting, teaching and doing more to support their child's mental health and reported challenges accessing professional supports.

What helped them take care of their children?



“Support groups with other parents who get it.”

TOP RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CAREGIVERS

ACCESS

- to mental & behavioral health supports *"just as easily as if I needed help for a heart attack"*
- to bereavement supports that work for children with behavioral health needs

SUPPORT

- for youth to process loss & proactively find resources to prevent unnecessary struggling
- for caregivers to speak with others who get it
- to connect, advocate & identify pathways to build what is needed for a child/young adult

RESPECT

- *"As a parent we just want help but instead we risk being judged."*
- *"Pointing out progress we've made in spite of the challenges and remembering that we will continue to be proactive towards reaching our goals."*