



## Family Matters

Elizabeth Ahmann, ScD, RN, PCC, NBC-HWC, and Deborah Dokken, MPA

# Children's Loss of Parents and Caregivers to COVID-19: 'A Hidden Pandemic'

Elizabeth Ahmann

Living through the COVID-19 pandemic has not been easy for anyone, children and families included. In general, children have been infected with COVID-19 at lower rates than adults, and when infected, have milder illness with low rates of hospitalization (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Still, since the onset of the pandemic, children have comprised 16.4% of total cases (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2021). As of October 14, 2021, some 6.2 million children in the US have tested positive for COVID-19 (AAP, 2021). Despite these numbers, a relatively small number of children have experienced serious illness as a result of the virus, with some developing multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C), some long-COVID, and some even succumbing to the infection (Mayo Clinic, 2021; Thomson & Rasmussen, 2021). Older children, those with underlying health conditions, and children from minority backgrounds are at increased risk of negative health outcomes of COVID-19 (Thomson & Rasmussen, 2021). The approval of vaccinations for adolescents and children will moderate these outcomes, as does use of masks and other infection-prevention procedures.

Illness is not the only impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on children, however. The pandemic has contributed to family financial strain, with effects on parental employment, health insurance, housing stability, and food security (e.g., Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021; Hetrick et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020). Children's academic progress has been affected, and pre-existing academic disparities for students of color and those with disabilities have widened (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2021). Parent and child mental health has taken a toll, with most children experiencing some "challenges to their mental health and well-being during the pandemic" (DOE, 2021, p. iv).

**Elizabeth Ahmann, ScD, RN, ACC,** is a Pediatric Nurse and an ADHD Coach specializing in work with college students and young adults. She is Co-Editor of Pediatric Nursing's "Family Matters" Series.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts on individuals, communities, countries, and the globe. Children are among those who have been affected. Although less likely than adults to become ill or die from COVID-19, children have suffered in the areas of financial security, education, and mental health. Additionally, recent estimates point to the startling numbers of children who have suffered the loss of a parent or primary caregiver as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We join the urgent call to action for development and implementation of family-centered and evidence-based strategies to support children facing the many challenges related to COVID-19, including those facing the loss of a parent or primary caregiver as a result of the pandemic.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, parent, orphan, pandemic, child.

Children already at risk of mental health issues are among the most vulnerable (Gleason, 2020). All of these challenges children and families face are likely to have effects on children for years to come, even into adulthood. Additionally, the toll, in general, has been higher on racial and ethnic minority children (DOE, 2021).

## 'Hidden Pandemic' of Parental/Caregiver Deaths

However, recent research suggests that perhaps the most devastating impact of the pandemic for children has been the number of children losing parents and other primary caregivers to COVID-19. According to UNICEF, "an orphan is a child (under the age of 18) who has lost one or both parents due to any cause of death" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] et al., 2021, p. 17). Recent studies suggest that "orphanhood and caregiver deaths are

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a hidden pandemic resulting from COVID-19” (Hillis, Unwin et al., 2021, p. 391).

Several studies have gathered data to estimate the number of children experiencing the loss of a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19, with estimates of a 15% or higher increase in such loss to children in the United States over the first 15 months of the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic numbers (CDC, 2021; Hillis, Blenkinsop et al., 2021; Kidman et al., 2021). Researchers point out that one in four COVID-19 deaths represents the loss of a caregiver for a child; and from April 2020 to June 2021, 1 in 500 children in the United States lost a parent or grandparent caregiver (CDC, 2021; Hillis, Blenkinsop et al., 2021). This amounts to a total of some 140,000 children in the United States experiencing loss of a “parent, custodial grandparent, or grandparent caregiver who provided the child’s home and basic needs, including love, security, and daily care” during that time period (CDC, 2021, para. 2). According to Hillis, Blenkinsop, and colleagues (2021), “The risk of such loss was 1.1 to 4.5 times higher among children of racial and ethnic minorities, compared to Non-Hispanic White children” (p. 1).

Numbers have risen since June 2021 with the increased prevalence of the Delta variant. As of October 2021, estimates are as high as 175,000 children in the United States having lost a caregiver (Jetelina, 2021). Globally, numbers are staggering. Hillis, Unwin, and colleagues (2021) estimated that from March 1, 2020 to April 30 2021, “1,134,000 children...experienced the death of primary caregivers, including at least one parent or custodial grandparent [and] 1,562,000 children...experienced the death of at least one primary or secondary caregiver” (p. 391). As in the United States, this number is likely much higher now.

## Impacts of Parent/Caregiver Loss

It goes without saying that the loss of a parent or caregiver can have not only a short-term effect on children’s well-being, but can permanently change their lives as well. In fact, “loss of a parent is among the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) linked to mental health problems; shorter schooling; lower self-esteem; sexual risk behaviors; and increased risk of substance abuse, suicide, violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation” (CDC, 2021, para. 3). (For more information on ACEs and their impact, see <https://www.cdc.gov/violence-prevention/aces/index.html>) Other risks faced by children losing a caregiver include poverty, or other loss of practical and/or financial support; housing instability; family separation; physical and emotional abuse; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); adolescent pregnancy; and both infectious disease (e.g., HIV/AIDS) and chronic illness (Hillis, Unwin et al., 2021; Jetelina, 2021). Susan Hillis, CDC researcher and lead author of recent U.S. and global studies on parental death due to COVID-19, suggests that “all of us—especially our children—will feel the serious immediate and long-term impact of this problem for generations to come” (CDC, 2021, para. 4).

## Calls to Action

Hillis, Blenkinsop, and colleagues (2021) suggested: “Addressing the loss that these children have experienced—and continue to experience—must be one of our top priorities, and it must be woven into all aspects of our emergency response, both now and in the post-pandemic future” (para. 4).

Hillis, Blenkinsop, and colleagues (2021) recommend an evidence-based and family-centered approach to support children in this situation:

Children losing caregivers to COVID-19 need care and safe, stable, and nurturing families with economic support, quality childcare and evidence-based parenting support programs. There is an urgent need to mount an evidence-based comprehensive response focused on those children at greatest risk... (p. 1)

In a July 2021 statement, UNICEF director Henrietta Fore similarly placed a call for family-centered action to address the devastation of COVID-19 parental loss (UNICEF, 2021):

As COVID-19 continues to devastate families and communities, we must protect every child’s right to live and grow up in an environment that supports their physical, psychological, social and emotional development. (para. 7)

To prevent and respond to this crisis for children in the immediate and long-term, it is vital that governments provide families with the emotional, practical and financial support they need. At the same time, we must work to support a system whereby children deprived of parental care can be looked after by extended family members and not placed in unsuitable alternative care. This includes:

- Ensuring families have continued access to social protection, counselling, and health care.
- Strengthening child protection services, including the social service workforce, for vulnerable children and families.
- Working with employers to promote family-friendly policies that allow caregivers to care for the child under all circumstances.
- Keeping schools and other children’s services open and accessible. (para. 6)

Hillis, Unwin, and colleagues (2021) further called for governments, organizations and individuals to all play a role in meeting the needs of children who have lost parents and caregivers:

Multilateral organisations, national and local governments, non-governmental and faith-based organisations, voluntary organisations, and donors [should] incorporate evidence-based programmes into their COVID-19 response plans to address the impact of caregiver COVID-19-associated deaths on children. (p. 401)

A joint report prepared through the collaboration of the CDC, USAID, The World Bank, World Health Organization, University of Oxford, University College London, Imperial College London, and University of Capetown (CDC et al., 2021) suggests that providing the support children and their families need to address this hidden pandemic of parent/caregiver loss is something that we, as a world community, are equipped to do:

Strong evidence exists to guide child-protective response measures harnessing cost-effective econom-

## Figure 1. 'Family Matters' Articles Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Families

- Bainter, J., Fry, M., Miller, B., Miller, T., Nyberg, A., O'Dell, A., Shaffer, G., & Vernon, L. (2020). Family presence in the NICU: Constraints and opportunities in the COVID-19 era. *Pediatric Nursing*, 46(5), 256-259
- Dokken, D., & Ahmann, E. (2020). Resources and support to maintain the 'essence' of patient- and family-centered care during COVID-19. *Pediatric Nursing*, 46(3), 154-155.
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- Negrete, B. (2020). Meeting the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic: Virtual developmental music therapy class for infants in the neonatal intensive care unit. *Pediatric Nursing*, 46(4), 198-201, 206.
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Note: Free access to these and other COVID-19 related articles is available online at: <http://www.pediatricnursing.net/>

ic, parenting and education support in combinations known to accelerate positive outcomes and avoid the risks of residential institutions. Simple, pragmatic, contextually relevant and low-cost services are available to support children's families and communities to continue caring for them.

This knowledge equips us to act with clarity, capability and confidence in achieving good outcomes. We have every reason to move forward in hopefulness... [T]ogether, we know what to do. (p. 43)

These various calls to action are timely and important. Along with efforts to vaccinate children, adolescents, and adults, and ongoing use of appropriate public health infection-prevention measures, pediatric nurses should join the urgent call to action for development and implementation of family-centered and evidence-based strategies to support children facing the many challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, most critically for those children experiencing the loss of a parent or other primary caregiver.

### To Learn More

To learn more about this topic, see *Children: The Hidden Pandemic 2021 – A Joint Report of COVID-19-associated Orphanhood and a Strategy for Action*, available online at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/orphanhood-report.pdf>

For other 'Family Matters' articles exploring the effects of COVID-19 on children and families, see Figure 1. ■■■

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