



The End of the School Year, The Beginning of the Grief

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With the sudden - but not surprising announcement - that schools would remain closed for the remainder of the academic year, a collective wave crashed down around so many school-aged kids. None felt the weight of that wave more than members of the Class of 2020. Parents I have talked with have used words such as “gutted”, “somber”, and “devastated” to describe the mood in their homes after the news hit. Tears flowed, anger erupted, and disappointment set in. We all knew this was a possibility, a strong one, but most of us would not allow our minds to accept that school would simply end without a proper sendoff. The school year came to a screeching halt during a press conference that did more than establish the permanency of remote learning. That press conference signaled the loss of hope that our lives would return to normal sometime soon. It also ended any hope that the class of 2020 would somehow be able to enjoy the rites of passage they so deserve.

This feeling of grief is the new normal. While it may feel strange to call it grief, that is indeed what it is, and we wear it like a heavy coat every day while still trying to carry on. As the Director of School & Community Services for Uplift Center for Grieving Children in Philadelphia, I bear witness to the grief of children every day. This grief feels different than any we have known before. It is equally as exhausting but both collective and individual in its manifestation. While many of us are focused on the very real devastation brought on by COVID-19 and grieving the suffering and death of people we love, we must also take the time to acknowledge and validate the losses that our kids are feeling and the immense impact it will have.

We mourn for the enormity of the little things we have lost and for the devastating impact of losing the big things. Our kids, if they hadn't before, have lost the belief that the world is predictable, orderly, and safe. Their routine is upside down, the simple freedoms they once enjoyed like hanging out with their friends on the weekend, playing team sports at school, and going to the park to shoot hoops are now banned. Kids are relegated to staying at home with just their immediate relatives, stripped of all social outlets, resources, and ways they may have coped before. From cancelling sports seasons and proms to forbidding graduation celebrations, every day our children and youth are losing more of what makes them whole and gets them through.

For some, like the class of 2020, there are no make-ups. There is no redo of the senior prom; of walking across the stage as the first one in your family to get a high school diploma; or capping off your high school career as the lead in the play. Unlike adults, kids do not have the decades of life experience to draw from in times like this. Even more, many families and children are not even sure where their next meal is coming from. For so many, children and youth are attending to the immediate fear and uncertainty necessary for basic survival. They often cannot even process the extreme grief that will be felt long after COVID-19 and physical distancing are over. It may be months, even years, until we as adults can fully grasp all that has been lost for our youth during this pandemic. These kids will need support and validation that these losses matter, and many will need access to mental health services to cope with the lasting impact. When the time is right, we can engage children in meaningful activities to process this experience, including making memory books of their missed milestones, using art or writing as a vehicle to express their pain, and talking with each other about their shared experience. As adults, we can try to recreate the moments and events that were missed, whether it means hosting a "prom" with just your family during quarantine or participating in a Zoom graduation celebration. We know that we cannot get those exact experiences back. But we can show our kids how we can be flexible and resilient in the face of immense pain. That is a beautiful gift.

It will take time to help our kids and the class of 2020 come to terms with this very unfair time and, like any grief journey, to find ways to make meaning and memorialize all that was lost.



**To the class of 2020 and beyond:
we see you and we honor your grief,
your feelings, and your journey to come.**

Author's Bio: Meghan Szafran, MS. LPC, CT is the Director of School & Community Services at Uplift Center for Grieving Children where she oversees and facilitates school and community grief groups for youth 5-22, provides bereavement training to caregivers and professionals, and post-crisis support to schools.

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