ALSF School Guide: Supporting Families and Classmates Affected by Childhood Cancer
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Cancer Diagnosis In The Classroom

A childhood cancer diagnosis can be difficult for teachers, administrators and families to manage in a school setting. This guide provides a useful set of tools and resources to refer to in and out of the classroom. Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation would appreciate hearing about your classroom experiences. Please write to us: FamilyServices@AlexsLemonade.org.

“Recently when a student in my class, beloved by peers and administrators, was diagnosed with leukemia, we all experienced the fear and sadness along with her. We wanted to make sure that she could prioritize her health while also maintaining the tether to normal life that school represents.”

- Emilie, high school teacher
At age 4, Alexandra “Alex” Scott, a young cancer patient, announced that she wanted to hold a lemonade stand to raise money to help find a cure for all children with cancer. Through annual lemonade stands and support from the thousands of people inspired by her spirit and determination, she was able to raise $1 million before passing away at the age of 8 from cancer. Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation (ALSF) carries on her vision of curing childhood cancers and is one of the leading funders of pediatric cancer research in the U.S. today.

In addition, ALSF is committed to helping families and their communities cope with a childhood cancer diagnosis by providing programs and services, like this guidebook.

A childhood cancer diagnosis impacts every aspect of a family’s life and particularly their school environment. When there is a student diagnosed with cancer in the classroom, it is an opportunity for the community to come together in support of the family and each other.

At ALSF, we believe every child diagnosed with cancer is a hero and their siblings are SuperSibs. These terms are used throughout this guidebook.

Although this information is based on a childhood cancer diagnosis, it may be useful in addressing other critical illnesses as well. Thank you to the school administrators, families and healthcare professionals who collaborated with ALSF to develop this content and are quoted throughout this guide. Among them, the following themes and advice emerged:

- **Educate students in the classroom about childhood cancer to avoid fear, misunderstandings or isolating the student.**
- **Involve the student in the classroom as much as possible while they are out for treatment to keep a sense of normalcy with their schoolwork, classmates and upcoming events.**
- **Provide extra emotional support to siblings of children with cancer in the classroom.**
- **Create a supportive and encouraging classroom environment to avoid bullying and harassment.**

Thank you for all you do to educate and enrich the lives of all children, but especially for being a source of support at a difficult time. For more information, please visit AlexsLemonade.org. Please reach out with your questions, concerns and feedback by emailing FamilyServices@AlexsLemonade.org or calling 1-866-333-1213.

**Thank you,**

Family Services Team
Communication is Key

The line of communication between the Hero Family and the school is central to creating the best experience possible. This section will help with planning and preparing for conversations with the family, faculty and students.
Talking with a Hero Family

Families often express feeling disconnected and unsure of how to communicate with the people in their lives after a critical illness diagnosis. This is especially true for schools because of how many individuals and systems are in place.

Reaching out and initiating communication with the family can remove the burden from them. It opens a dialogue about the family’s wishes and thoughts on the changes they are experiencing as they relate to the classroom environment.

**TIP: Maintaining the family’s privacy, trust and dignity should be at the forefront of any decision or discussion.**

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To ensure open communication and a smooth transition for the family:

- **Designate one person from the school staff to be the primary contact person.**
  This person will receive and provide updates, coordinate sending materials and other items as needed. The student’s teacher, counselor, psychologist, nurse or principal can serve as the point of contact.

- **Work with the family to complete necessary paperwork.** This may include health and educational plans.

- **Assess whether or not the family wants to share the hero’s diagnosis with the school community.**
  Some families may be hesitant to share information. However, there are many benefits to raising awareness within the classroom to best support the family.
  Other families may be eager to share details with the school community.
  Establish a healthy balance between sharing information with the class and maintaining focus in the classroom.

- **Share your ideas with the family for addressing the circumstances in the classroom.**
  Be respectful if the family chooses not to follow your suggestions.

- **If possible, talk through how schedules may impact SuperSibs.**
  Determine whether there are opportunities for the school community to mitigate that impact.

- **In collaboration with the family, develop an ongoing communication plan in order to:**
  - Remain updated on the hero’s treatment status
  - Include and accommodate the hero in the classroom as much as possible
  - Address issues or concerns regarding SuperSibs

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Hero Michael (second from left) and his family
Talking to Kids about Cancer

Educating students about the hero’s diagnosis can foster a supportive and encouraging environment in the classroom. Though it can be intimidating to think about explaining cancer to children, it is essential for them to receive honest, age-appropriate information. Children who are not given the facts will often invent worst-case scenarios. Talking about cancer in a way they understand will decrease the likelihood of misunderstandings, bullying and isolation.

The following suggestions may help.

Ages 2-5

- Children may have a basic understanding of illness and taking medicine to feel better.
- They may associate cancer with more familiar illnesses, like a cold or flu.
- Emphasize that no one can catch or cause cancer.
- Keep explanations about a hero’s diagnosis simple.

Examples:
- “His blood is sick. The doctors are going to give him medicine to help his blood get better. Sometimes he will miss school because he has to be in the hospital to get the medicine or he will stay home because he doesn’t feel good.”
- “She has a bump on the inside of her head. The doctors want to make that bump go away, so they might try to take it out. They might give her a special medicine to make it smaller.”

Ages 6-10

- They might think cancer is contagious and not understand the physical changes associated with treatment.
- Generally, they are ready for basic information about a cancer diagnosis and treatment.
  - Introduce vocabulary they may already have heard such as cancer, tumor, chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, etc.
- Begin conversations with leading questions.
  - “Have you heard about cancer before?”
  - “Do you know what cancer is?”
  - “What do you know about cancer?”

Examples:
- “There are different kinds of cancer and he has leukemia. That means that the cancer is in his blood. The doctors are going to give him strong medicine called chemotherapy or ‘chemo.’ The chemo will help the leukemia go away.”
- “The doctors found a tumor in her brain. The tumor was pushing on the part of her brain that helps her walk and run and that’s why she’s having trouble with her balance. The doctors are going to try to take it out with surgery. She’ll be in a special kind of sleep the whole time and won’t feel anything.”

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Talking to Kids about Cancer (continued)

Ages 11-18

- Students understand complex cause and effect relationships, such as illness and side effects.

- They may already know someone in their family with cancer. Students may make generalizations based on previous experiences and knowledge.

- Start with the basics of the diagnosis. Some students may want a lot of information about their classmate; others may want to avoid talking about it. Emphasize that diagnoses and treatment are unique and outcomes will vary.

- They are likely to deny feelings of fear or worry. If they want information, they are likely to search on the internet, confide in their friends or use social media.

Examples:
- “As you may already know, there are many different types of cancer and ways to treat it. Childhood cancer is very different than adult cancer; can you think of reasons why?”

- “What do you know about this type of cancer and how it’s treated? What kinds of side effects from these treatments do you think may be possible?”

- “She will be in the hospital for the next few weeks to start treatment. We can imagine how hard this will be for her. Let’s talk about some ways we can show our support and keep in touch with her.”

Preparing Classmates for Potential Changes

A childhood cancer diagnosis can have many physical and emotional effects on members of the family. These changes are normal given the circumstances. It’s important to prepare students for changes they may see, including:

- Looking or acting different
- Less energy, more tired
- Missing school
- Not participating in activities the same way as before

Help the hero or SuperSib feel included and avoid focusing too much on these changes to help everyone adjust.

However, a diagnosis may also cause a range of emotions from other students, so it’s important to support them.

Here are a few ways:

- Acknowledge their feelings. It is okay to feel angry, sad or confused.

- Stress the importance to students of reaching out to adults such as their teacher, school counselor, school nurse or parents to express their emotions.

- Offer extra support and counseling to students who need it. Be sure their parents know of this offer too.

- Be aware of signs of withdrawal, acting out, change in behavior, loss of interest, not completing assignments, dramatic change in grades, regression, etc.
Questions and Answers

Your students may have many questions about the hero. Encourage questions so they are able to fully understand the situation and how best to support their classmate. Remind your students not to dwell on the topic so that they keep a balance of healthy thoughts and feelings.

Below are frequently asked questions by kids about cancer and suggestions for how to respond:

Q: Can I catch cancer?
A: No, it is not contagious.

Q: Why does your hair fall out?
A: The medicine they are taking, called chemotherapy, sometimes makes hair fall out.

Q: Can my friend still play?
A: It depends on how they feel. We can ask them when they return to school.

Q: How did they get sick?
A: Doctors do not know why some children get cancer.

Q: Will they die?
A: Doctors are doing everything they can to prevent that from happening.

Q: How can I be a good friend to them?
A: Support them! Be respectful of their privacy and their abilities. Be the good friend you’ve always been.

Q: What can I do?
A: Help them with assignments in class, share notes they missed, offer to carry books, ask them how you can help them today and be friendly.

Q: Can I talk with other friends about this?
A: Be mindful of respecting the hero’s privacy and do not gossip.

Q: Should we visit them in the hospital?
A: We need to check with the family to see if they are allowing visitors.

Q: Will they still participate in extra-curricular activities?
A: We can ask them. They might have to decrease their involvement this season/year while they are receiving treatment.

Q: Can they still go to school?
A: Depending on their treatment schedule and how they are feeling, they may have to miss some school.

Write in your own questions or concerns below. Then think about potential answers or reach out to us for suggestions at FamilyServices@AlexsLemonade.org.
Transitioning back to school

In addition to their education, children think of school as their social world. This section discusses ways to prepare the Hero Family and classmates for the return to school after a diagnosis.

“Mia couldn’t go to school because she was in active treatment. When her sister went back to school, Mia, who is quite the trickster, tried to sneak on the bus to go to school with her.”

– Melissa Bento, Mia’s mom
When children are out of the classroom for extended periods of time, they often feel isolated. Maintaining communication with the hero and SuperSib will help everyone stay connected and will create a smoother transition upon their return.

**TIPS:**

**Stay connected**

- Utilize technology in the classroom and for lessons. Skype or send videos and pictures.
- Keep student and family updated on school activities and events.
- Write letters or cards with support and encouragement to the hero and their SuperSibs.

- Involve parents in the classroom to support the family (i.e. providing meals/restaurant gift cards, carpool, homework delivery, sending items to the hero and sibling, etc.)
- Help cancer patients stay connected to their classmates: [MonkeyInMyChair.org](http://www.MonkeyInMyChair.org)

  Each child receives a stuffed monkey that takes their place in school when they can’t be there.

*Letters and cards sent to Alex Scott*

*Hero Morgan with her Monkey, Bananas*
Preparing the Hero Family for their return to school
Work with the designated school point of contact to make a plan.

Provide extra support or necessary accommodations in the classroom

- Allow for accommodations such as wearing hats, eating snacks or drinking water during class, taking breaks more often, restricted physical activities and academic pursuits.
- Work with the school nurse to ensure all daily medication and medical needs are addressed.
- Make a plan for emergency situations such as the hero getting ill in the classroom.

Encourage group work and other activities that the hero is excited for their return

Are they excited to...

- See friends?
  Assure the family that their classmates are looking forward to seeing them/welcoming them back.
- Participate in art class, music class and clubs?
  Remind the hero that adjustments and accommodations can be made if they are nervous about participating.
- Share their story?
  Ask them if/how they want to talk about their experience.

Suggest a small class conversation about their diagnosis and treatment to address questions, normalize visible changes and reduce stigma. Offer a teacher, nurse or other trusted school professional to co-present if the hero doesn’t want to do it themselves.

- Throw a welcome back party! Roll out the red carpet and celebrate the hero’s return to the classroom. Be sure the family is comfortable with this.

“As a certified school nurse, I find team teaching with the student with cancer to be an empowering way for the student to express their thoughts and feelings to their peers. The end result is enhanced understanding while negating bullying and harassment.”

- Lynn Owen, RN, BS, MPA
  Certified School Nurse
  Haddon Township, NJ School District
Discuss potential challenges with the hero on the school bus

- Cancer treatments often cause nausea and the hero may be prone to motion sickness.
  - Discuss with bus driver to address unforeseen issues.

- Work with the bus driver to keep an eye out for potential bullying or harassment.
  - Ask the hero and SuperSib to think about friends they can sit with to feel safe and comfortable.

Confirm with the family that all school professionals will keep an eye out for potential bullying and/or harassment issues

- Bullying is most prevalent in areas that are less supervised.
  - To help prevent bullying:
    - Encourage the hero and SuperSib to speak up about any unwanted or threatening behavior.
    - Pair the hero up with a “buddy” to be their seat neighbor.

When the hero and SuperSib return to school:

- Create a sense of normalcy in the classroom.
  - Stick to routines as much as possible, but be flexible to create new ones as needed.

- Some heroes and SuperSibs, especially in older age groups, become hyperfocused on their schoolwork and staying connected to their activities.
  - This is a way of creating their own sense of normalcy when everything around them has changed.
  - Let them set their pace and stay in touch.

If a hero displays any educational difficulties, communicate with the parents so they can discuss it with their doctor

- Make necessary accommodations and recommendations for learning support.
  - This may or may not require a formal individualized educational program (IEP) or 504 plan.
  - Be aware that these issues may become permanent and need long-term planning.

Ensure a smooth transition for aspects that might make the hero and SuperSib anxious such as...

- What will their friends think?
  - Reassure them that friends and classmates are excited for their return to school.
  - Share what information has been conveyed to classmates to clear up any misconceptions that the return is a surprise.

- What will be the physical toll of attending school and doing homework?
  - Talk through ways to reduce stress and fatigue.
  - Remind them that homework and schedules can be modified.
  - Make a plan for taking breaks when needed (i.e. visiting the nurse’s office, stepping into the hallway, etc.)
Heroes are at higher risk for educational challenges.

Cancer treatments may affect memory, learning abilities and fine motor skills temporarily or permanently. Some areas include:

- Handwriting
- Spelling
- Reading
- Vocabulary
- Math
- Concentration
- Attention span
- Ability to complete tasks on time
- Memory
- Multi-step processing
- Planning
- Organization
- Problem-solving
- Social skills

Meet Sullivan

“U”ntil November 2016, Sullivan’s health was fine. Then, he was diagnosed with brain and spine cancer. As a parent, it was one of my biggest fears come true. Sullivan bravely underwent multiple surgeries to partially remove the main tumor and release the pressure on his brain. Sullivan’s tumor removal surgery resulted in Posterior Fossa Syndrome which affected his vision, speech and ability to walk.

Today, Sullivan continues the long process of rehabilitation and adaptation to his new life as a cancer survivor. He has made miraculous strides in physical therapy, but the effects of the treatments are extremely damaging.

Sullivan has worked back up to being in school full time and has caught up, but due to the devastating effects of radiation and chemo, some accommodations have to be made to help him deal with challenges that he never struggled with before. Sullivan’s short-term memory and mental focus are not what they were before cancer, but we had no choice. To save Sullivan’s life, those treatments with all those side effects were necessary.”

-Jen Butler, Sullivan’s mom
Prepare classmates for the return of the hero and SuperSib

The hero’s physical appearance may be different

- Weight loss or gain
- Missing hair, eyelashes or eyebrows
- Changes in skin tone, scars and bruising

Keep the topic honest, but general: “Our friend is coming back to class and you may notice some changes. Her hair has fallen out because of the medicine. It is in the process of growing back, so she might wear a hat for a while. Let’s make our friend feel welcome and comfortable.”

What else might be different?

- As mentioned in the “Communication is Key” section, in addition to possible physical changes, they may have less energy and may not act the same as before the diagnosis. They may not enjoy activities in the same way.

Set some ground rules if the hero gets sick in the classroom:

- Classmates will feel a sense of responsibility to help protect their friend.
- Help the hero feel less embarrassed about getting sick in front of classmates by responding calmly and deflecting the class’ attention.

Encourage students to focus on the present rather than what the hero missed while they were out of school.

Provide examples of positive things to say:

- “Is there anything I can do to help you with today’s assignment?”
- “Good to see you today!”
- Brainstorm more ideas with your class.

How can the class support the hero?

- Help the hero acclimate by welcoming them back and sticking to typical classroom routines. Don’t single the hero out.
- Offer—but don’t insist—to help with classroom activities.
- Be a good friend by listening and being kind.
- Show empathy instead of sympathy. Try to think, “How would I want to be treated?”
As a group, discuss what is appropriate to say or ask

- Ask the group ahead of time what kinds of questions they have.
- It is okay for students to ask the hero questions about their treatment and diagnosis as long as they are respectful and understanding if the hero is not comfortable answering or talking about it.

Remind students to respect the hero and SuperSib’s privacy

- Don’t repeat things that are shared by the hero or SuperSibs to other students.
- Stop or prevent gossip when they hear it; gossip is usually untrue and can be a form of bullying.

Steer students away from asking questions about death

Other examples of appropriate and encouraging phrases:

- “We missed you!”
- “Good to have you back!”
- “It’s nice to see you!”
- “How are you feeling today?”
- “Can you tell me what happened?”
- “What does that medicine do?”

Encourage students to resist asking SuperSibs lots of questions about the hero

- They may not know the answers depending on how much is being shared with them at home.
- Instead, say “We are sorry about your brother or sister and hope they get well soon. How are you doing?” or “Would you like to talk about anything? I’m here for you.”
- With all the attention the hero is receiving, SuperSibs often feel left out and uncomfortable answering questions about the hero.
- Direct questions to designated school point of contact.
Prevent Bullying and Harassment

Childhood cancer comes with many changes for both heroes and SuperSibs. Sometimes, those changes can lead to bullying. This section discusses ways to prevent bullying in your community and make sure everyone feels supported.
Bullying often occurs in response to unfamiliar and sudden changes. Here are some ways to address and prevent it in your school community:

- Check in with the parents and, if possible, the hero about how they would like to address their change in appearance.
- Have a discussion with students about these changes before or when the hero comes back to school.
  
  Some heroes like to be the one to talk about these changes.
  - *This can be done in collaboration with a school professional to help guide the discussion.*
  - *This can foster a sense of normalcy and acceptance.*

- Some schools opt to have an event to show solidarity with the hero, which prevents ostracism (hair-cutting or head shaving, hat day, scarf day, etc.)
  
  It’s best to discuss this in advance with the family.

- Bullying is most prevalent in areas that are less supervised.
  
  Make it a priority across the school administration to be extra observant of the students.
  
  Address potentially harmful behavior quickly and diligently.

- Be sure to include the hero and sibling’s bus driver(s) in these conversations; bullying often takes place outside of the classroom.
- Create an environment of respect and comfort for the hero and SuperSib, but avoid singling them out.
  
  While they need extra support from their classmates during this time, it can be embarrassing.
  
  The extra attention can create an imbalance among classmates that fosters resentment, which can lead to harassment.
  
  Provide realistic examples of positive ways to engage with the hero and SuperSibs.
  - “*Is there anything I can do to help you with today’s assignment?”* “*Good to see you today!*”
  - *Talk about anything other than cancer (ex., music, movies, video games, etc.)*

*Sibling* often face teasing or harassment because of what their hero is going through. Be mindful to address this even if the hero and SuperSibs are not in the same school.
Supporting Siblings

Siblings of children with cancer can go through significant psychological stress while their sibling is fighting cancer. This section discusses ways to ensure they feel supported by the school community and continue open communication with their parents.

“Something as simple as making the classroom more comfortable can make all the difference. One of my teachers did everything he could to surround me with positive energy and people. When working with partners, he made sure I was paired with one of my close friends. When you come in and feel totally separated from everyone and feel as if people do not understand you, it is nice to be physically close to someone who makes you feel loved.”

-CARA, SUPERSIB – sister, Caitlin, was diagnosed when Cara was in 8th grade
Siblings of a childhood cancer hero typically experience distress due to the fear and uncertainty of their sibling’s diagnosis. At home, the focus is mostly on the hero, and SuperSibs may not want to share their feelings for fear of being a burden. Providing a safe, supportive environment at school may decrease their feelings of isolation, guilt, fear or being misunderstood.

**TIP:** You can also encourage the Hero Family to sign up for the SuperSibs Comfort and Care program. This free mailing program is designed to provide age-appropriate, evidence-based activities and worksheets to help siblings learn coping skills, receive encouragement and feel empowered during their family’s battle against childhood cancer. Parents can find more information and register their child at SuperSibs.org.

### CLASSROOM SUPPORT

- Provide as much positive feedback as possible.
- Understand they may need decreased or modified academic demands.
  - Some SuperSibs want more work or activities to direct their focus away from what is happening at home. Offer suggestions based on your observations.
- Younger SuperSibs may benefit from a reward system initially after diagnosis.
- Maintain classroom routines as much as possible.
- Resist the temptation to exempt SuperSibs from important school/classroom rules. Flexibility is important, but so is the safety and well-being of the entire school community.
- Specifically include and recognize SuperSibs when sending letters, goodies or resources to the hero and family.

### DISCIPLINARY ISSUES

- View irritability as sadness rather than confrontation.

### COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS AND/OR GUARDIANS

- Always check with the family on how comfortable they are sharing information with classmates and community.
- The more they understand what is going on at school, the more they can help the child at home.
- Sharing challenges or problems in the classroom with the family may seem like an added burden, but it’s essential to avoid larger, long-term problems.
- Emphasize areas where the SuperSib is doing well and prevailing.
  - This provides comfort and encouragement to parents at a time when it feels like everything is upside down.
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

• Let SuperSibs know you care about their well being and provide opportunities for them to confide in you or someone else.

  Gently encourage sharing feelings and concerns with teachers, school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists or parents.

  Use caution to not appear as though you are pressuring the SuperSib to share more than they are comfortable sharing.

• Focus on how the SuperSib is coping.

  Try to not ask only about how the hero is doing. They may not be comfortable sharing personal information or stories and could feel pressure to lie and say something positive.

• Talk about things specific to the SuperSib.

  Talking about things other than cancer can be extremely helpful. Ask them about their extra-curricular activities, other classes, hobbies, etc.

• Validate their feelings.

  SuperSibs may not want to seem like a burden since they are not the ones who are sick. Validate that it is okay for them to feel upset, scared or angry.

• Promote peer support and connection.

  Encourage classmates to provide a comforting and supportive environment for the SuperSib. Peer support is especially important for teenage SuperSibs.

• Recognize common reactions and emotions.

  Stress, grief, confusion, anger, sadness, decline in academic performance, difficulty concentrating, and acting out in class are all signs that the SuperSib is struggling and needs support.

  SuperSibs who appear to be overachievers need support too. Some SuperSibs may start to excel and participate more in the classroom.

  Be sure to check in regularly with SuperSibs and communicate with their parents. This ensures everyone can support the SuperSib in coping and processing their emotions.
Bereavement and Grief

A loss in the school community is devastating. It has a deep impact on students and the classroom. You know your classroom best. Work with your team to come up with a plan to share the news with the community and support students and staff.
Talking to students about death

PLAN IT OUT

Work with the Hero Family, your school team and school district officials (especially mental health professionals) to determine the best way to tell students. Aspects to consider:

- What does the family want the classroom and school to know?
  Respect the family’s wishes, but offer your knowledge, experience and best practices as guidance.
  Some families would rather not make an announcement, so you may need to come up with a plan on how to address questions from the school community.
  Be prepared to offer suggestions of how the news could be shared.

- Who will tell the students?
  The teacher is not the only option; the school counselor, the school nurse, or another trusted official can be included in the conversation.

- Should students be told in small groups or the whole classroom at once?
  Depending on the atmosphere of the classroom and the closeness of the students, it may be best to tell specific students individually, like their closest friends or students who have shown a lot of emotion regarding the diagnosis.

- How will the news be shared with the rest of the community?
  Your school district may already have protocol for sharing this type of news. Consider whether adjustments need to be made based on the nuances of the hero’s diagnosis and battle.
  Depending on your district’s protocol, consider informing the parents of the student body prior to sharing the news with students. This allows parents to debrief with their children and prepare for their child’s response.

“The life and legacy of Alex Scott left a lasting impact on everyone who knew Alex and on all the children and families yet to attend Penn Wynne Elementary School. First and foremost, Alex was our best teacher. We took our cues from her; Alex was a remarkable child, brave, smart and kind. We enjoyed every minute of the three years we had with her, and we learned to communicate openly and honestly about her illness. Equally important, we appreciated her parents, Liz and Jay Scott, for their wise counsel and courage.

No one is prepared for a devastating illness or the death of a child. What we learned was that we could rely on one another and that there were many resources available to us. Don’t be afraid to ask questions and access support. It’s there for you. It has been years, and Alex’s spirit is stronger than ever. The students, staff and families of Penn Wynne Elementary School carry on her determination to cure childhood cancer, and they do so, as Alex did, ‘one cup at a time.’”

- Gail, Alex’s Principal
  Penn Wynne Elementary School
Heroes are often integrated with the whole school. You may not realize the connections some students have with others in different classrooms or how they will be impacted by the loss.

Anticipate how the news will travel and how quickly.
- If the news is not shared by the school administration, gossip may create a negative environment for SuperSibs and classmates who were closest to the hero.

Provide age-appropriate explanations, give concrete details and use words such as death and dying.
- Avoid vague phrases such as “a better place,” “sleeping,” “not with us,” “lost,” or “up in the sky” as they can be confusing for children.

Different age groups understand and react to death differently. Increasing their understanding of death will allow them to better cope with the loss and grieve their classmate.

**PRESCHOOL AGE** – may believe death is temporary, may view it as “sleeping”; begins to understand concepts of irreversibility.
- Common reactions: may have separation fears; may display regressive behaviors.

**AGES 6-8** – understand death is not reversible.
- Common reactions: may internalize death, display physical reactions to emotion, exhibit regressive behaviors.

**AGES 9-12** – understand death is not reversible.
- Common reactions: fixating on details, acting out, withdrawing or appearing indifferent so they don’t stand out to peers or feel vulnerable to emotion.

**AGES 13-18** – adult-like understanding of death; likely to think about short and long-term effects of this death on themselves and family.
- Common reactions: asking detailed questions, withdrawing and pulling away from friendships, struggle with expressing feelings, difficulty focusing.

**HOW TO HELP:**
Encourage asking questions, sharing concerns, feelings or fears through ongoing communication.

Be aware that students may have different reactions and ways of coping.

Normalize the variety and complexities of emotions felt during a loss.
- Example: “It’s okay to feel sad when you think of missing them, but it is also okay to feel happy when you think of fun memories with them, too.”
- Modeling appropriate and healthy reactions will encourage the students to express their emotions as well.

Provide a private space for students who need time alone to grieve. Refer students to school counselor, school social worker or school psychologist for extra support.
When a student in my classroom died unexpectedly, I knew that her classmates would be profoundly impacted. I was surprised, however, that some students were significantly impacted for prolonged periods. I could not have predicted this because, the students didn’t appear very close to the deceased student in the classroom. I found that it was important to watch for signs of grieving in all of the students, not just the ones who seemed closest to the deceased student.

- Mary Jane, Special Education Teacher
Resources/Appendix

If you’re looking for more resources to share with students or add to your school community, the following will provide additional information for support during a childhood cancer diagnosis.

GENERAL RESOURCES

• Children’s Oncology Group School Support Guide

SUPERSIBS RESOURCES

• When Your Brother Or Sister Has Cancer: A Guide Book For Teens, National Cancer Institute

• Hi, My Name is Jack: A Book for the Healthy Siblings of Chronically Ill Children, by Christina Beall-Sullivan

GRIEF AND LOSS RESOURCES

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

• Video and Downloadable Grief Support Modules for School Personnel


• “Children & Loss: Teachers serve as a crucial emotional bridge for a child at times of loss. What do we need to know to help students cope?” Scholastic, by Bruce D. Perry MD

• “Death and Loss: Helping Children Manage Their Grief” Scholastic, by Bruce D. Perry MD, April 2006

• Children & Grief: Guidance & Support Resources

• “Grief in Schools,” Highmark Caring Place

• Finding Your Way Through Sudden Loss and Adversity: A Workbook by Hold The Door For Others, Inc.
Get Involved

SUPERFRIENDS
Anyone can be a SuperFriend Ambassador! If you or any students know a friend with cancer, their siblings or their parents, they can sign up to share their story and teach others how to be supportive during this difficult time.

HOST A LEMONADE STAND
Perfect for any time of year, this signature fundraising method lets students take a stand against childhood cancer! Mix, pour and find a cure in your classroom by hosting a lemonade stand. Hosting an Alex’s Lemonade Stand will help fund treatments and cures.

CHAMPION FOR KIDS WITH CANCER
Student-athletes of any age can sign up as a Champion and ask for one-time donations or pledges that multiply based on what statistic they track. From home runs to wins to baskets, no matter the stat, athletes of almost any sport have a chance to give back! Go to ALSFChampions.org.

ORGANIZE AN AWARENESS DAY
Host an awareness event like a hat day, pajama day or yellow day where students donate to dress up and raise awareness for childhood cancer! Students will love the chance to wear something different to school, and the school community will rally against childhood cancer together.

LEMON CLUB
Give high school students a chance to give back and raise awareness for childhood cancer in your community. Take a leadership role and organize a Lemon Club to help a great cause in the process.

Go to AlexsLemonade.org/Get-Involved to sign up today!
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For more information and resources visit AlexsLemonade.org or email the Family Services team at FamilyServices@AlexsLemonade.org.