

Georgia children who lost parents to COVID-19 struggle with grief



Credit: Steve Schaefer

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Helena Kindred and two of her grandchildren, Ayden (left) and Rylee (right), pose for a photograph in Kindred's Alpharetta home Tuesday, July 12, 2022. The children lost their mother to COVID-19 last year. (Steve Schaefer / steve.schaefer@ajc.com)

Ayden Davis remembers little about the day his mother fell down.

He was 5 at the time, and a year later, while recounting the story for a visitor, he bewildered his grandmother with a reference to aliens in the parking lot.

“Aliens?” Helena Kindred asked, interrupting him. Then, it dawned on her: “Ambulance. Oh, he’s talking about the ambulance.”

Ayden had gone to the door of his third-floor apartment while his mother’s fiance tended to her.

Ayden’s mother, Marrisha Kindred, had given birth a couple of weeks earlier while infected with COVID-19. She would soon die with the disease, state records say, leaving Ayden, his older sister, Rylee, who is now 7, and their new baby brother motherless.

“Someday we’ll see her because we’ll be in heaven too one day,” said Ayden, now 6.

The children are still trying to understand her death, which appears to have affected how they act at school, particularly Rylee.

“I look at their ages and all this trauma,” Helena Kindred said. “It’s no wonder that they have behavioral issues.”

They are among thousands of children in Georgia thought to have lost a parent, grandparent or other caregiver to the pandemic. While the rest of the country moves on, the grief and turmoil have left them with wounds that may not heal without therapeutic intervention, experts say.

The mental health needs are stretching Georgia's already understaffed schools, which have [one psychologist](#) for every 6,390 K-12 students, according to a February report by the Hopeful Futures Campaign. The recommendation is one psychologist for every 500 students. School counselors, who provide short-term counseling and crisis intervention, are also understaffed, with one per 447 students when the recommendation is one per 250.

Explore [AJC Investigation: Georgia's pediatric mental health care crisis](#)

Estimates of the loss vary.

An [international group](#) that included Imperial College London and Harvard and Oxford universities used deaths in excess of the norm to calculate that nearly 300,000 U.S. children had lost a primary or secondary caregiver in connection with the pandemic by the end of June, 11,725 of them in Georgia.

Another group, the COVID Collaborative, has a more conservative estimate using only deaths due to infection. It estimated there were 7,882 such children in Georgia by June.

The collaborative's bipartisan [coalition of experts](#) in health, education and the economy has urged the federal government to serve these children with everything from financial support to more mental health care, particularly in schools.

A lack of resources is one problem, the collaborative's report said. Another is finding the grieving kids.

"There's no systematic way to identify any child that has been impacted by the loss of a parent or caregiver in our country," said Catherine Jaynes, a senior director of the collaborative.

Schools often must play a role

A [2018 paper](#) in School Psychology Quarterly reported that caregiver loss was associated with lower academic achievement, reduced concentration, alienation from school and less faith in teachers.

Most students will recover but some may feel lost, hopeless or helpless, becoming depressed, violent or even suicidal without intervention, said Julie Kaplow, a co-author of that report.

"So thoughts like 'I wish I could have intervened, I wish I could have saved them, I wish they didn't have to suffer so much' ... can be extremely debilitating," said Kaplow, who leads trauma and grief programs in Texas and has been training more school counselors — and teachers — about grief since the pandemic started.

Grief-related trauma is not a typical part of the curriculum in educational programs for school counselors, she said.

The capacity to address grief and trauma varies in Georgia's 180 school districts.

The Georgia Department of Education has partnered with the [National Center](#) for School Crisis and Bereavement to provide training in grief support. The center is working with a handful of school districts around the country, including Georgia's Chattooga and Walton counties.

Several school districts in metro Atlanta, including Clayton, DeKalb and Fulton counties, said they already offer support for students coping with trauma. The services are not tied to pandemic caregiver loss, and none of those districts said they were tracking the number of such cases.

DeKalb said it has social workers, psychologists and counselors who meet with students individually or in groups while every Fulton school has partnered with one of several organizations offering mental health services.

One of those organizations, [Kate's Club](#), has been helping children cope with death for nearly two decades and is expanding statewide to meet the increased need caused by COVID-19.

“If every child and family who needed support knew about it and asked for it,” said Lisa Aman, the Kate’s Club executive director, “it would most likely overwhelm the current resources available.”
[Explore Kids and mental health: ‘We have to have it rooted in the fabric of our community’](#)

Hurdles for relatives who step in

Dr. Cornelius Daniel doesn’t need studies to feel the pandemic’s toll.

The dentist said he knew as many as 60 families at his old Conyers practice who lost a close family member to COVID-19. Many who died were grandparents raising grandchildren, he said. Last winter, he sold his stake there and opened a new practice in McDonough, closer to home.

He wanted to shave hours off his commute because he needed time to address his own story about COVID-19 loss: His uncle and aunt died with the disease on the same day last year, leaving two teenagers. Cornelius Daniel, 32, and his wife took them in.



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Dr. Cornelius Daniel and his wife, Melanie, assumed responsibility for teenagers Myles and Marina Daniel after their parents, Martin and Trina Daniel — Cornelius Daniel's uncle and aunt — died on July 6, 2021, with COVID-19. The Daniel family from left: Caiden, 5; Marina, 16; Melanie, 33; Christian, 10; Cornelius Sr., 32; Myles, 19; Cornelius Jr., 7. (Courtesy of Daniel family) Myles Daniel, 19, the older of the teens, is in college.

His sister, Marina, 16, is a junior in high school and lives with the Daniels and their three young children.

She gets counseling at school and through private services, Cornelius Daniel said.

He and his wife struggled with the paperwork and bureaucracy that accompany deaths in the family.

Myles Daniel didn't know the college passwords his parents had set up for him, and they had to work through federal agencies to secure funeral and survivor benefits.

At least they had a financial cushion and the wherewithal to do the research. Cornelius Daniel worries about families that are less fortunate.

“The vast scope of this issue will shock most people,” he said. “It’s really transformed American life.”

Trying to keep students on track

Chrissy Mingo, a counselor at Parklane Elementary School in Fulton County who has training to deal with grief-related trauma, typically offers counseling to seven or eight grieving students each school year. That number doubled in 2021-22 though she doesn't know if that's due to the pandemic.

Discussing death in a group setting gives them a sense of belonging and normalcy, she said, and an understanding that they aren't alone.

Her students talk, write and read a book about “invisible string” then place imaginary bracelets on their wrists. Later some of the kids, particularly the younger ones, will walk up to her to tell her they're still wearing their string. “Other kids don't know what that's about, but they know that's my connection to my mom,” Mingo said.

Trauma from grief can undermine cognition and affect self-esteem, said Liz Carson, outreach manager for Kate's Club, which offers [free social and therapeutic programs](#) at its own facilities and in schools and other locations, partnering with Mingo at Parklane. Explore [Complete coverage of COVID-19 in Georgia](#)

Younger children may express their grief in confusing ways, Carson said.

“A 7-year-old isn't going to come up to their teacher and say, you know, I feel really angry today because my mom died and that was unfair,” she said. “That anger is going to come out in how they're interacting with their peers.”

Kate's Club finds grieving children one at a time, with help from schools, hospices and the health care system. Aman would like something more systematic: “Is there a way to connect, let's say a death certificate to birth certificates, so that when an adult dies, we can understand who the grieving children are, so the numbers turn into names?”

Kate's Club is researching ways to link birth and death data to track down more impacted children.

Epidemiologists at the Georgia Department of Public Health are doing similar work, said a spokeswoman, who added that it is time- and labor-intensive work.

“Pre-COVID, there was not an immediate DPH need or request from other program partners for such a process, so it was never done,” the spokeswoman said.

As sadness sets in, impact ripples



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Marrisha Kindred posed with her two older children, Rylee (left) and Ayden (right), before she died with COVID-19 on Sept. 23, 2021. (Courtesy of family)

Marrisha Kindred's children have struggled to make sense of her death.

Ayden, who chose to live with their grandmother in Alpharetta, kept saying she would return in 100 days. Otherwise, he rarely talked about her.

Rylee, who is living with their father in Hiram, misbehaved at school.

Her father, Ty Davis, said she didn't understand her mother's death, at first.

"Once we had a memorial, then that's when she came to the realization that she didn't have her mom anymore," he said, "and I guess as soon as she realized that, she just started going through these little discipline spells."

She yelled and cried when she didn't get her way and got into a kicking match with a girl on the playground.

Kindred said she was concerned Rylee's behavior might lead teachers "to put her back in the corner somewhere."

Kindred said Ayden has gotten regular counseling provided by an outside organization at his Alpharetta school. Davis said he thought Rylee was getting counseling in Hiram last school year, but he wasn't sure about it this fall.

Hiram, in Paulding County, provides counseling to students when it knows they have suffered a loss, a district spokesman said. Due to rules protecting student privacy, the spokesman would not address Rylee specifically.

Rylee complained about a girl on the school playground who didn't believe her when she told her about her mother's death. The girl called Rylee a liar and a "stinky pig." Things went downhill from there.

"She kicked me first," Rylee said, "and then I kicked her."

When asked what people should know about kids who have lost a parent, she said they should imagine losing one themselves.

As for how she would like things to be different at school, she said, "I want that little girl to believe me."

Atlanta Journal-Constitution data specialist Jennifer Peebles and former data specialist Nick Thieme contributed to this article.

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat at [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).