

community has not changed and is perhaps even more critical at this time," stated Michelle Griepsma, Community Care's hospice services manager.

It's one of the reasons why a new virtual children's grief support program – Standing Together And Receiving Support (STARS), for six to 12 year olds – was launched in October. Response to the program was so great that when the program resumes in January, three weekly sessions will be offered.

The program gives participants a safe place to talk about their loved ones, share their grief stories and interact with their "big feelings" like sadness, anger and even joy. They will gain skills to help them seek support, sit with their emotions and gain strategies to calm the storm of grief.

"Kids are dealing with a personal loss as well as a global trauma," said hospice bereavement program co-ordinator Tiffany McGahon. "It's (grief) difficult to navigate to begin with and their world is changing every day ... The ground has been moved from under their feet over and over again. Parents are also desperate to help support their children and have been reaching out for resources."

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McGahon noted that, unlike a natural disaster where people are impacted, grieve, rebuild and move forward, the pandemic just seems to keep taking. Schools closed, isolating children from support systems such as friends, teachers and trusted adults. Youngsters were not allowed to visit with at-risk grandparents and other extended family members. Funerals, which often offer closure and comfort, were scaled back and gatherings were cancelled.

"Never has there been such a prolonged angst. There's so many layers to this," continued McGahon. "It really does present a unique challenge on so many levels."

Courtesy of critical grant support – hospice bereavement programs are not government-funded – the STARS program is offered free of charge. Weekly letters