

SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENS

When a family member who is a firefighter or EMS dies of COVID-19



If you are supporting a child or teen who is grieving a family member who was a firefighter or EMS provider and died of COVID-19, we hope these tips will be helpful. These suggestions come directly from the thousands of families who have participated in our peer grief support groups.

While COVID-19 is still relatively new, much of what we've learned from the children and teens in our groups holds true no matter how the person in their life died. We also recognize there are aspects of having someone die of COVID-19 who was a firefighter or EMS provider that are unique.

Some of the unique challenges that can be experienced by families of firefighters and EMS providers are:

- The fact that their person was exposed to COVID-19 because they were putting other people's lives before their own as part of their job.
- Uncertainty about whether the person's death will be considered a line of duty death and how this decision can impact the financial support the family is entitled to and the type of funeral/service the person receives.
- Navigating their own grief while simultaneously dealing with the politicization of COVID-19 and the stigma and shame that can come with that reality.
- Being surrounded by news and everyday conversations about how their person died.

- Concerns about whether immediate and ongoing support by their network of firefighter or EMS families will be well-functioning and available to them.

Grief is as unique as the child or teen you are supporting, so please adapt these tips as needed to be relevant for them.

Tell the truth

One of the first questions adults ask us is "How do I tell my child or teen that the person has died?" You want to start with a short, simple explanation of what happened, using words they can understand, and let their questions guide what else to share. We recommend using concrete language such as "died or dead" as euphemisms such as "went to sleep" or "gone" may confuse children and even teens. We also encourage you to share with children and teens your family's beliefs surrounding death. Depending on the circumstances and your child's developmental level, you might say:

- I have very sad news. Dad died this morning. The doctors tried hard, but they couldn't fix his body.
- Remember me telling you that Aunt Maria got COVID? The medications the doctors gave her couldn't help her lungs and she died.
- Honey, I'm sad to tell you that mom died this morning. You know how she had a heart condition? It made it hard for her body to fight off COVID.

Follow that short explanation, by asking, “Do you have any questions for me?” and try to answer them honestly. It’s also okay to say, “I don’t know, but I will try to find out.” This helps children and teens know that if they have questions in the future, they can come to you and trust you will tell them the truth.

Be prepared for a variety of reactions

When someone dies, children may experience many emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, powerlessness, loneliness, shame, guilt, numbness, and relief. Sometimes children don’t show any visible reaction at all. Grief looks and feels different for everyone and is shaped by their age, relationship with the person who died, ethnicity/race, culture, gender, support system, and other unique factors in children’s and teens’ lives.

What grief looks and feels like is also influenced by the messages children and teens absorb from family, friends, and their larger community. Messages like, “You have to be strong,” “Your mom wouldn’t want you to be sad,” and “It’s not okay to be mad at the person who died,” are a few examples of ideas about grief children and teens might carry. Some children and teens might be angry about the circumstances that led to the person getting COVID or about the kind of healthcare they did or didn’t receive. Others might be afraid that someone else they care about will get COVID and die too. You can help by letting them know that all feelings are valid and okay. Children and teens may also experience powerful emotions like anger and fear. It’s important to offer options for them to express these emotions safely. Remind children that while it’s okay to feel angry, it’s not okay to hurt anyone or anything. For example: “You are really, really angry right now, and that’s okay. You can punch the punching bag or stomp on the bubble wrap, but you can’t kick me or throw your toys at the dog.”

Listen, compassionately

When children and teens are grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, or try to fix their feelings. What’s more helpful is to listen without

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judging, interpreting, or minimizing. If the person who died usually kept their emotions to themselves, children and teens might try to do the same as a way of honoring that person. You can help by modeling how to talk about and express your own thoughts and emotions. That could sound like, “The other day, I drove by the park where we’d go on Dad’s day off and I started to cry and laugh at the same time remembering all the fun times we had there together.” If your child or teen does decide to share their emotions or thoughts with you, listen compassionately. This demonstrates you are someone they can turn to when they’re hurting or need advice.

In addition to their grief, children and teens are likely to hear different perspectives about COVID-19 from many sources including friends, classmates, extended family members, other adults, social media, and the news. Sometimes that information can be confusing, conflicting, and hurtful. Let children and teens know they can come to you with any questions they have about what they’ve seen or heard. You can also help them brainstorm how they want to respond when someone says something untrue or hurtful.

Create routines and consistency

Life is often in upheaval after a death, so finding ways to create safety and predictability is helpful. Children and teens might also need flexibility, so avoid being rigid about routines. It can help to reassure them that no matter what, someone will be there to help with cooking, homework, chores, and other daily routines. If your family used to attend events with other firefighter or EMS families, ask your child or teen if they would still like to participate or if they prefer to start new traditions.

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Provide choices

When someone dies, especially someone whose career was focused on safety, children and teens might feel powerless and out of control. Having choices helps re-establish a sense of agency in the world and trust that they can have a say in their lives. Provide day-to-day choices in line with their developmental level. For example: “Would you like hot or cold cereal for breakfast?” “I need help with dinner, would you like to set the table or clear the dishes?” “The lawn needs to be mowed, would you rather do it after school today or Saturday morning?” It’s also important to let children and teens make choices about issues directly related to the death and their grief. Examples include asking if they want to help with sorting the belongings of the person who died – and which items they would like to keep – and how they want to acknowledge significant days such as holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of the death.

Make space for play and creativity

Children and teens often turn to play, movement, and creativity to express themselves and make sense of their situation. Consider offering opportunities for playing with dolls and puppets; creating art of all kinds; and writing, journaling, and making videos. Big energy activities like running, dancing, and sports can be safe ways to express strong emotions, as can playing an instrument, writing songs, or simply listening to music.

Remember the person who died

Remember and talk about how the person lived rather than just about how they died. Their life was unique and important. When someone dies of COVID-19, there can be a lot of hurt and frustration related to how the person contracted the virus, public health measures, the behaviors of others, and the decisions made

by organizations and institutions. Other challenges include reminders of how the person died showing up in daily life, the stigma other people can have about someone dying of COVID, and/or feeling like everyone else has “moved on” from the pandemic. With all of this in the mix, it’s important to make time to focus on the life the person lived and their shared memories with others. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person’s life: “Your mom loved to play trains with you” or “Your dad was a great cook, remember their amazing enchiladas?” Sometimes just remembering to say the person’s name can be very meaningful. Keep in mind though that when someone dies, especially in the line of duty, it’s natural for people to talk about them as a hero or heroic. No adult is perfect, and no child is either. It can be helpful for children and teens to have opportunities to talk with supportive people about what they liked, and disliked, about the person who died.

Funerals, memorials, and celebration of life services

It’s important to give children and teens choices when it comes to attending and participating in rituals to honor the person’s life. Whether the person who died will receive a formal, semi-formal, informal, private service, and/or a Last Call ceremony, be sure to prepare children and teens for what to expect. Let them know what they will hear and see during various rituals and routines. Funerals and services can feel very public for children and teens, so it can also be helpful to ask if there’s something they would like to do privately or just with their family to honor and remember the person.

Find sources of support for yourself

If you are parenting or supporting a child who is grieving, one of the best ways to help is to take care of yourself. Other adults who are grieving have said that when someone dies of COVID-19, their grief is interwoven with many mixed emotions related to how other people, organizations, and even the person who died responded to the pandemic. These emotions, combined with sadness, confusion, and other aspects of grief, can be a lot to navigate. By accessing support,

you demonstrate ways for children and teens to do the same. You might also need to ask for help with the paperwork and logistics involved with accessing the financial support you are eligible for from the person's employer. If they are available, connect with other families who have had a firefighter or EMS provider die for guidance on navigating the benefits system.

Get extra help if needed

While most children and teens will find constructive ways to adapt following a death, some are potentially at risk for developing challenges such as depression, difficulties at school, or anxiety. Some families find it helpful to attend a support group where they can connect with others who are also grieving a death. While friends, family, or a support group may be enough for most children, others may require

additional assistance. If you notice ongoing behaviors that interfere with a child's daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don't be afraid to ask about their experience and training in supporting children and teens who have had someone die from an illness. If anyone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text HELLO to 741741. They are available 24/7.

These are just a few tips for supporting children and teens who have had someone in their lives die from COVID-19. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

To access all the resources in the COVID-19 community toolkit, please visit dougyc.org/covid.



The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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employeerelieffund.org/brave-of-heart-fund