

# Supporting Children & Teens When Someone Dies of COVID-19



The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families



Since the coronavirus pandemic started in 2020, hundreds of thousands of grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, friends, and extended family members have died of COVID-19. Each person leaves behind family and friends, including children and teens, who are grieving. If you're supporting a child or teen in this situation, you're likely wondering, "How do I help?" We hope these tips will help guide you.

## TELL THE TRUTH

How do I tell my child or teen? It's a question we hear a lot. Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened, in language they can understand, and let their questions guide what else to share. Avoid euphemisms such as *passed away*, *went to sleep*, *crossed over*, or *lost*, as they can confuse children. Depending on the circumstances and your child's developmental level, you might say:

- *Remember me telling you that Grandpa Jerome had COVID-19? He went to the hospital and the doctors worked hard, but they couldn't fix his body. Grandpa died.*
- *I have very sad news. Auntie Maria died. She had COVID-19. The medications the doctors gave her weren't able to fix her lungs.*
- *Honey, I'm sad to tell you that dad died this morning. You know how he had a heart condition? It made it hard for his body to fight off the coronavirus.*

Being honest minimizes confusion and keeps children and teens from using their energy trying to figure out what happened. Children who are not told the

truth often fill in the blanks, sometimes with a story that is worse than what actually happened.

News travels fast, and it is important for children to hear about the death from a caring adult rather than through social media or gossip. No matter the circumstances, it can feel unreal that someone has died. For many reasons, this sense might be heightened when someone dies of COVID-19. Hospital regulations that prevent families from visiting, saying goodbye over the phone or by video chat, or an inability to have a funeral, memorial, or other gathering to honor the person's life, can contribute to a sense of "did this really happen?" You can help by normalizing that sense of disbelief, answering their questions, and reminding children and teens it's okay if it doesn't feel real yet.



## ALLOW FOR AND SUPPORT A VARIETY OF EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

When someone dies, children can 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, race, culture, gender, support system, and other factors in children and teens' unique identity constellations.

With powerful emotions like anger and fear, offer options for children to safely express them. 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.* Some children and teens might be angry when they see others not following current health guidelines. Allow them to express that frustration and brainstorm ways they can kindly set limits with others.

Children and teens might worry that other people they care about will also get COVID-19 and possibly die too. While you can't promise no one else will get sick or die, you can reassure them of the steps you and others take to stay as safe as possible. *You're feeling scared that if anyone goes to work they will get COVID and die. Remember that everyone in our family works really hard to follow the guidelines from the doctors and public health officials. We wear a mask, wash our hands, and stay six feet away from other people. Is there anything you can think of that might help you feel more calm when your dad and I go to work?*

### **LISTEN, COMPASSIONATELY**

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, or try to fix their feelings. What's more helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or minimizing. When children trust you will listen and understand, they'll be more likely to come to you when they're hurting or needing advice. You don't have to have all of the answers. It's okay to say, *I don't know.*



### **CREATE ROUTINES AND CONSISTENCY**

Life is often in upheaval after a death, so finding ways to create safety and predictability is helpful for children. Children might also need flexibility, so avoid being rigid

about routines. Since you are likely also grieving, it can help to reassure children that no matter what, someone will be there to help with cooking, homework, chores, and other daily routines.

### **PROVIDE CHOICES**

When someone dies, children can feel powerless and out of control. Giving children choices helps them regain a sense of agency in the world and trust that they can have a say in their lives. Provide day to day choices that are 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 play 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, and the behaviors of individuals. Another challenging aspect is being continually reminded of the pandemic through news coverage, seeing people in masks, and all the other ways that daily life is different. It's important to make time to focus on the life the person lived and what they meant to others. You can

help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life: *Your auntie really liked going fishing with you, or Your grandpa was a great cook, I know you loved their pancakes.* Sometimes just remembering to say the person's name can be very meaningful.

## **FUNERALS, MEMORIALS, AND CELEBRATION OF LIFE SERVICES**

During the pandemic, it's likely that the rituals and routines we turn to when someone dies will look different than before COVID-19. Depending on current public health guidelines, families might have to delay the funeral, memorial, or homegoing. Families are also finding new ways to come together in small groups, doing a virtual service, or even live-streaming a memorial for those who are unable to attend. No matter what your family decides to do, now and in the future, ask children and teens if they would like to attend and if they want to participate in the planning. They often have clear ideas about how they want to honor the person who died.

## **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. We've heard from other adults grieving when someone dies of COVID-19 that their grief is interwoven with feelings of frustration and anger with people who downplay or dismiss the seriousness of the pandemic. This anger, combined with the sadness, confusion, and other aspects of grief, can be a lot to navigate. So if getting help for your own grief is one of the best ways to support children and teens, think about the people

and activities in your life that are sources of comfort and connection. By accessing support, you model ways for children and teens to do the same. Given the pandemic, you might need to get creative about tending to your own needs. Getting outside, drinking water, getting enough sleep, eating nourishing food, asking for help, and reaching out to your community are options that might still be accessible.

## **GET EXTRA HELP IF NEEDED**

While most children and teens will ultimately return to their prior level of functioning 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.



**The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families**

### **Our Mission**

Dougy Center provides 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 in grief.

### **Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources**

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 55,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](http://dougy.org) or [dougybookstore.org](http://dougybookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.