

SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENS WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS DYING IN A HOSPITAL OR CARE FACILITY



If you're faced with telling a child or teen that a family member or friend in a hospital or care facility is likely to die soon, you might be feeling confused and overwhelmed. It's never easy to share this news, and especially so when there might be factors that prevent you and your family from physically visiting the person who is dying.

We know it can be a lot to read through multiple sources of information, so we compiled this resource as an overview of how to support children and teens before, during, and after someone they care about dies in a hospital or care facility. Given the current COVID-19 global health crisis, we've included suggestions for what children, teens, and families can do when they aren't able to visit or see the person who is dying.

SHARING DIFFICULT NEWS

Begin the Conversation

Talking with children and teens about the situation is not easy, but there's a good chance they already have a sense that something is happening. Because this conversation is tough to have, parents and caregivers might put it off, hoping there will be a perfect time to talk about what's going on. Unfortunately, there is rarely a perfect time. What's important is having the conversation so that children and teens can be part of the process your family is facing and make informed choices about how they want to be involved in individual and family decision-making when a family member or friend is dying.

Use open, honest, and clear language

Be honest and give clear, accurate information using words your children and teens can understand. Avoid phrases like "not getting better," "won't be here much longer," or "passing on," because they can be confusing, especially to younger children. As hard as it is to say, when you use the word "dying" it helps children understand what is happening. Rather than "Daddy is really sick," name the illness so children can differentiate between someone getting sick with a cold and sick with cancer or COVID-19. If the family member is hospitalized due to an accident or other sudden event, share the information you have in clear, concise, and developmentally appropriate language. Young children need basic, concrete information about what they can expect to happen and when. Teens might need and want more details, especially as the family member's death approaches. By being open, you model for children and teens that they can talk honestly and trust you will tell them the truth, even when it's really hard to talk about.



Acknowledge and normalize their feelings and thoughts

Try to listen without interrupting or minimizing whatever children are thinking and feeling. Let them know it's normal to have a lot of different feelings and thoughts when someone they care about is dying. "You're feeling really scared that Mommy doesn't know how much you

love her. It's really normal to want people to know just how much we care about them." You can help children and teens learn to express their experiences by naming your thoughts and emotions. "I'm noticing how short my temper is — when I'm scared, I sometimes show it in anger. I'm working on taking three deep breaths when I feel upset."

Model being okay with not knowing

Children and teens will ask questions you won't know the answers to and that's okay. You can appreciate their questions, tell them you don't know the answers, and then assure them that if you find out more information, you will let them know. This teaches children and teens that it's important to ask questions, even questions that we may not have answers to.

HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS BE INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS DYING

Just like adults, children and teens benefit from feeling included and given the opportunity to be involved in decisions related to communications, rituals, and practices when a family member is dying. Share with children and teens that it is likely the person will die and ask if they would like to do or say something now that they have that information. Some children and teens may want to verbally share their thoughts or feelings with the person who is dying, while others may choose to make a card or drawing, write a letter, or leave a treasured item, such as a stuffed animal or favorite blanket, with the person. If the person who is dying is unable to have visitors, or the child or teen has chosen to not visit in the hospital or care facility, there are still other ways for them to communicate with the person who is dying. If a family member, social worker, or medical professional can be at the bedside of the person, they can read the child's or teen's letter, share their picture, or facilitate a phone or video call.

If children and teens aren't sure what to say, write, or draw, here are some prompts that might help them get started:

- I love you...
- I will miss you...
- I'm glad you've been my...
- I will not forget...
- One thing I've learned from you is...
- I'm really sad that you are dying. Thank you for...
- I wish...
- A favorite memory I have is...



Children and teens can also sing songs or tell stories to the person who is dying. Remind them that even though their person might not be able to respond, they can likely hear them, and their messages matter. If time allows, family members can record a compilation of favorite music and family stories that can be played for their person in the hospital.

Some ideas include:

- Sharing stories about the person. You can do this as an immediate family or invite others to join virtually using video chat. Consider recording the stories.
- Prepare a meal together and eat the person's favorite foods.
- Create a playlist of songs the person likes or that remind you and your family of them. This playlist can be a collective one that members of the extended family contribute to as well.
- Invite children and teens to read or share what they would say to the person if they could visit them in person or talk to them on the phone.
- Create a place in your house with pictures and other items connected to the person who is dying. Let children and teens know it's a spot they can go to talk to the person as if the person was there, or they can just have a place to go to think about them. For young children, consider adding a play telephone so they can act out a conversation with the person.

In this time of the COVID-19 global health crisis and physical distancing requirements, families might face the heartbreaking inability to be with the person who is dying. You can acknowledge how painful and unfair that feels and work to create rituals in your own home that help children and teens feel connected while also saying or doing what feels right for them before the person dies, even from afar.

- Create a collective online photo album where family members and friends can add photos and captions. This can be turned into a hard copy book to share with children and teens.

It's important for children and teens to have the opportunity to honor the person and to choose if and how they want to engage in activities and conversations with and for the person before they die. If they choose not to, let children and teens know that this is okay and there will be ways for them to do so in the future, even after the person has died, if they want to participate.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND TEENS AFTER THE DEATH

Listen

When it comes to grief, especially for children and teens, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, or try to fix it. What's more helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating. When we truly listen, we often find out what they're wondering about or struggling with.

Create safety through routine

When someone dies, it can make the world feel out of control and unsafe. One of the best ways to create safety for children and teens is to provide routine and consistency – while also leaving space to be flexible and responsive to their needs. Some examples might include sticking with wake up and bedtime routines, scheduling regular play time, or even just a one-on-one daily check-in with your children and teens.

Be open to different ways of grieving

Grief looks and feels different for everyone. Some children and teens may cry quietly and want to be left alone. Others might have difficulty sitting still or being by themselves. Some children and teens will not outwardly show reactions, which can be challenging for adults who are supporting them. There are many ways to process and express grief and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. While everyone's grief is unique, many children and teens experience increased fears around health and safety. This might be especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more tips on helping children and teens cope with fear, see our [Tip Sheet](#).

Provide outlets for self-expression

While some children and teens talk about their experiences, many express themselves through art, writing, music, or creative play. You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of pictures, or writing a letter. Some children and teens will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression, so be sure to create time and space for big energy play like running outside, sports, or messy creative projects. For downloadable activities, visit our website at www.dougy.org/resources.

Talk about and remember the person who died

Talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. It's okay to use the person's name and share what you remember about them. By bringing up the person's name, you give children and teens permission to share their feelings and memories. Children and teens often like to keep objects that belonged to the person or connect them with the person in some way. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures a child or teen might like, ask which ones are important to them. Involve children and teens in activities, but without forcing them. These may include visiting a grave site, going to a special place, sharing a favorite meal, lighting a candle, sharing memories, or any activity that feels right for your family.

Get extra help when needed

While most children and teens will not require professional services to address their grief, some will benefit from additional support. This might mean attending a grief support group or connecting with a therapist. If you are interested in grief support groups at The Dougy Center, please call 503-775-5683.

For information on grief support groups beyond our service area and other helpful resources on loss and grief, please visit our website at dougyc.org. If you need or your child needs immediate crisis support, please call the 24/7 Crisis Line, 1-800-273-8255 or text HELLO to 741741.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougyc.org or dougycbookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, 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. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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