

HOW CAN I HELP?

Kids, Teens, and Coronavirus Stress

Like adults, children of all ages need to process what is happening and find reassurance that everything will be all right. But unlike us, they have much less experience to draw on to do that. Children look to their parents or caregivers to help them understand and manage this experience. Though we don't have an exact blueprint for this either, there are some key ways we can help. Remember: **F.O.R.T**

Facts: Children need to know, at an age-appropriate level, what's going on. Ask what they know or have heard, then share facts using language they can understand. Only offer as much information as they are asking for. Storybooks can be helpful with small children. You might watch the news or view online posts with your older child and then discuss it together.

Openness: Being honest and open tells a child that it's okay to discuss what happened, and it's okay to have questions and feelings about it. They learn they can rely on you to give honest answers, to be consistent, and to hear them. If we hide, lie, or only talk to other adults in private, children get the message that the topic is off limits and fears can grow. Very young children may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings. They may show them through play acting or drawing. You can help them name what they're feeling.

You know your child's personality and behavior patterns. If you see changes that concern you, and they go on for more than a couple of weeks, consider contacting a mental health professional.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can offer help and resources.

Reassurance: More than just saying, "Everything's going to be okay," give children real information to focus on. Talk about how your family is staying safe and keeping others safe by staying home. Talk about "the helpers" – doctors, nurses, first responders, scientists – who are helping people get well.

Actions also help our kids feel reassured. Creating routines, schedules and structure communicates that life is still following some predictable norms. Being connected and close as a family is also reassuring. Look beyond the forced closeness of stay-at-home guidelines to find quality time together. Try new things together. Have regular activities. Give them your undivided attention.

Tools: Children, like adults, want the feeling of powerlessness to go away. They want to find a place of emotional stability where they don't feel scared or sad. Talking through feelings and patiently allowing repeated questions is an example of how you can do this.

We can also help them learn active coping skills, such as talking back to anxious thoughts or using deep breathing to calm tension. Teaching them healthy hygiene rituals gives them a feeling of power over germs. Encouraging drawing and other creative activities gives them a way to express and respond to feelings. You can also help them find ways to help others. This can be an opportunity to get involved in a project that brings pride and takes away some of the feelings of helplessness.

Together, all the way.®



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WHAT DO I SAY?

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Any parent can feel unsure about how to talk about things that might be scary or upsetting to a child. It's even harder when we feel stressed and challenged too. The examples below may help.

Invite your child to talk, but don't force it.

"There's been so much news about the coronavirus. What have you been hearing?"

"What are your friends saying about what's going on?"

"I have so many thoughts in my head with all the changes going on. Sometimes it helps me to say them out-loud. Do you ever feel like that?"

Give direct, but sensitive, age-appropriate answers.

"COVID-19 is a new sickness. The germs are easy to catch from other people. The doctors want us to stay home for a while, wash our hands, and wear masks when we go out so we don't catch it."

"There isn't a cure for it. But doctors and scientists are working hard to find medicines that will help."

"For most people, it's like getting a cold or the flu. They stay home and they get better pretty quickly."

It's okay to say you don't have an answer.

"They don't know, but they're working on it."

"I don't know, but I think..."

Listen, reflect, validate, reassure.

"I can tell you felt really scared when we heard the news about people dying. I was scared too. But we're being careful to follow the rules and stay safe."

"It's really hard to not be able to see Grandma. I know you miss playing with her. It's going to be fun when we can start visiting her again."

"Missing baseball season is a blow. I know you're hurting. I hope the school will find some way to make it up."

Be ready for hard questions or concerns.

"It's possible that one of us could get sick, but we're doing all the things we need to in order to stay healthy."

"I'll always do everything in my power to keep you safe."

Keep including messages of reassurance:

"We're going to do everything we can to stay healthy."

"We're not the only ones dealing with this. People across the world are staying home to help make sure the sickness doesn't spread."

It's fine to share your feelings, but stay in control.

"I feel so sad about this."

"I really miss getting together with my friends too."

"Dad and I get scared sometimes, but thinking about all the people who are helping makes us feel better."

Use open-ended questions to draw out thoughts, feelings and concerns

- › "What do you miss most/least about going to school?"
- › "How did you feel when we were watching the news?"
- › "What's the hardest/best thing about staying home?"
- › "Can you think of other times you've felt like this?"
- › "What helps you feel better when you get worried?"
- › "What do you wish for right now?"

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AGE MATTERS

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The pandemic has brought different levels of loss into the lives of our children. For some, it's navigating things such as the loss of norms, connections, and special events. Others may face the death or illness of a loved one. All losses bring a level of grief. This handout describes how grief can look at different ages. It also describes how children understand death and offers ideas for how you can help.

Children and grieving

Children, like adults, need to grieve and work through loss. But they may do this in ways that don't look like sadness or grieving to an adult. Children may:

- > **Appear to show grief only briefly** – sad one minute and happy the next. Parents may mistakenly believe that the child didn't understand what happened or it didn't affect them. More likely, this is due to the fact that young children don't feel strong emotions for long periods, thus protecting them from what might be too much to handle at one time.
- > **Seem more resilient than adults.** Some children are able to go back to a normal routine and activities almost immediately after a significant loss. This may be a natural protective reaction. Life can seem more stable when we focus on things that are unchanged. This doesn't mean that they've stopped needing comfort and nurturing.
- > **Use games to express and work through their feelings.** It can be unsettling for adults, but children often play games about things that scare them, such as death. It's a safe way to express and work through emotions and fears.
- > **Be very talkative about death** and have many questions about what happened. They may bring up the topic with anyone who is around them, even strangers, to see how they react. This helps them understand how to respond.
- > **Act in ways that are unusual for them.** At young ages, behavior may be the only way that a child can communicate feelings such as anger, worry or sadness. Activity levels may go up. They may start sleeping poorly. You may see concentration drop. Small children might go back to younger behaviors. Try to understand and react to the reason behind how your child is behaving, not just the behavior. If issues persist, consider reaching out to a professional.

You can't "fix" this for your child, but you can keep providing emotional support, comfort and understanding as they weave the reality of a loss into their life. The stages below offer specific suggestions for different age groups.

Grief and developmental stages

INFANCY TO 2 YEARS

Understanding of death

- > Not yet able to understand death
- > Able to react to separation and tension
- > Pick up on feelings of grief and stress

How they may react and show grief

- > May change eating and sleeping habits
- > May be unusually quiet or fussy

How to help

- > Keep environment calm
- > Be aware of your tension
- > Get support to cope
- > Stick to routines
- > Have a consistent caregiver
- > Give extra holding, comfort
- > Reassure in a calm tones

3–6 YEARS

Understanding of death

- > Death is like sleeping; it is reversible
- > The dead can think, feel and know things, but they do it somewhere else
- > May worry that the dead will miss them
- > Believe that only old people die
- > May be punishment for bad behavior or thoughts

How they may react and show grief

- > Stop talking, feel distress, may have tantrums
- > Ask many questions: “Where did they go?” “When are they coming back?”
- > Eating, sleeping, bladder, bowel control issues
- > Show fear of being left alone, have nightmares
- > Magical thinking – faith in magic and the power to make things appear or disappear at will
- > May think they did something to cause death
- > May fear they’ll die if they go to sleep

How to help

- > Describe death in simple, clear language
- > Follow their lead in terms of how much information to give
- > Be prepared to answer the same questions over and over
- > Never equate sleep with death
- > Talk about what happens to the body when it dies: the heart stops beating, breath stops, the body doesn’t move or feel pain anymore and the person will not “wake” up
- > Reassure them that they did not cause it
- > Try to have a consistent caregiver
- > If your child is going to a funeral, prepare them in simple detail about what happens
- > If physical problems go on, talk to your doctor.
- > It is okay to let your child know you’re sad, but shield them from intense grieving

6–9 YEARS

Understanding of death

- > Death is no longer thought of as reversible
- > Know death is final and that may be frightening
- > May believe that only old people die
- > Don’t believe it can happen to them
- > Aren’t clear on cause and effect, may blame themselves when bad things happen
- > Death is thought of as a person or spirit, such as a skeleton, ghost, monster or boogeyman

How they may react and show grief

- > Intense interest and curiosity about death
- > Have many specific questions
- > Acting out, physical fights (especially boys)
- > Develop learning problems or fear of school
- > Worry about their own health
- > Develop symptoms of an imaginary illness
- > May withdraw or become too attached and clingy

How to help

- > Don’t use confusing terms such as “lost,” “passed on,” or “sleeping peacefully”
- > Answer questions honestly with direct language
- > It is okay to say you don’t have answers
- > Share your own feelings
- > Tell them that they are safe
- > Share good memories of the deceased
- > Encourage them to draw, write a poem or create an art piece about their feelings
- > Allow them to participate in memorial ceremonies
- > Alert teachers about death and any issues

9–12 YEARS

Understanding of death

- > Understand that everyone dies and they will too
- > Death is final and cannot be changed
- > Have seen media accounts of violence
- > Fear their own death and burial
- > May still have some magical thinking

How they may react and show grief

- > Mood swings, strong emotions, possibly guilt or anger; they may be ashamed of being emotional
- > Increased worry about their own death
- > Act like it doesn't bother them, partly because they fear being rejected if different from peers
- > Changes to eating and sleeping patterns
- > May show younger or impulsive behaviors

How to help

- > Encourage them to show emotions, even if it is anger (it may work best to set aside specific times to do this)
- > Remember that they are still children and need comfort and support
- > Offer factual details about what happened; children of this age need information to feel in control and process what is happening
- > Might wish to give the child something that belonged to the person who died as a way of remembering and memorializing
- > Support a return to normal activities

ADOLESCENTS

Understanding of death

- > Similar to that of an adult, but teens tend to deny that death can happen to them
- > Can become something that isn't discussed

How they may react and show grief

- > May respond in unexpected ways, such as acting as if everything is all right and they are fine, or that the death has interrupted their life
- > Tend to turn away from family and look to friends for support
- > Unsure of how to handle their emotions
- > May withdraw, be angry or irritable
- > May have questions about the meaning of life and death and their own vulnerability
- > Feel guilty, especially if deceased was close

How to help

- > Don't wait for them to come to you, approach them
- > Share your own fears and concerns and ask them to share theirs with you
- > Support involvement in activities that allow them to help others – volunteering, for example
- > Encourage a return to regular routines
- > Be available to them as a family, but allow time with friends
- > Remember that even though they seem independent, they still need your support
- > Be careful not to lean too heavily on them

Reference

National Cancer Institute. (n.d.). *Children and grief*. Retrieved April 23, 2020 from <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/Patient/page6>

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