

## **Supporting Children Through Grief and Loss During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Children benefit from care and compassion after experiencing the death of someone they knew. Adults can support children with coping by helping them feel secure and grieve in a healthy way. This guide offers ways to prepare for a conversation with your children about loss, what to expect for different age groups and resources for additional help.

### **Preparing to share sad news**

Knowing what to say and how to support children after a loss can feel overwhelming. This is especially true if you, too, are grieving and managing your own emotions.

- If possible, the person closest to the child should tell them the news. Briefly explain when and how the person died.
- Children will have questions and will need clear answers. Let them ask questions first, then answer in the most reassuring and simplest way you can. Avoid phrases like “passed away,” “gone” and “we lost them.” Children tend to be very literal, so abstract language may scare or confuse them.
- Children will want to express their feelings. They may be feeling alone and may be confused by their intense feelings. Let them know what they are feeling is normal. One way to do this is by sharing your own feelings. Reassure them that you are there to support them and you will get through this together.
- Children will need normal routines. Even during a period of grief, children benefit from the security of routines. This may be difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, but maintaining some routines can provide children with predictability and comfort.

### **Considerations by age group**

Children’s emotional and social learning develops over time. In families with several children, each child might experience and express loss in different ways, depending on their age. Expect children to process their loss over many years as their understanding of death grows. During the pandemic, families often can’t grieve in the way they are used to. If there are remote alternatives for religious or cultural rituals, allow children to participate. Teachers play an important role in supporting their students and are encouraged to reach out to students’ families after a death. They can find out how students are doing, offer advice and assistance and partner with families to provide support over time.

Age group	Understanding of death	What you may expect	What you can do
Toddlers and preschoolers (ages 2-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can't yet think about the future, so can't grasp the permanence of death</li> <li>• May ask repeatedly about the person who died</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many emotions, even if they can't name the emotions</li> <li>• Changes in sleeping or eating patterns</li> <li>• A return to earlier habits, such as thumb-sucking or bed-wetting</li> <li>• Make-believe involving the person who died</li> <li>• Clingy, irritable or angry behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create opportunities for children to express their feelings through play and physical activities. Play is a way for a young child to express feelings and cope.</li> <li>• Talk about the person who died.</li> </ul>
School-age children (ages 6-12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand death is final, but may think about whether the person could come back</li> <li>• Can think about how others may be experiencing the loss</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A return to earlier habits, such as thumb-sucking or bed-wetting</li> <li>• Change in sleeping or eating patterns.</li> <li>• Trouble focusing, worrying about themselves or others getting sick or dying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a sense of safety and security.</li> <li>• Encourage children to talk about their feelings.</li> <li>• Remind them how you are working together to keep safe.</li> <li>• Encourage physical activity.</li> </ul>
Adolescents (ages 13-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a fuller understanding of death.</li> <li>• May struggle to accept the death of someone close.</li> <li>• May wonder if they could have prevented the death.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turn to peers to discuss the death</li> <li>• Tell adults they don't want or need to talk</li> <li>• A need to work through denial, anger, which may lead to increased risk-taking or rule-breaking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be available, but give them space to grieve in their own way.</li> <li>• Stay connected by checking-in regularly.</li> <li>• Encourage them to talk to you or others, as well as to share memories of the person lost.</li> <li>• Support their reaching out to peers or using support apps.</li> </ul>

### **Taking care of yourself is part of taking care of children**

Children can learn good coping strategies from the way you take care of yourself. It will also reassure them you will be strong for them and able to support them emotionally. Try to stay connected and accept help from friends, relatives, faith- or spiritual-based communities or mental health professionals.

## When to get professional help

Symptoms of grief that continue for more than six months or are negatively affecting children's daily functioning may mean the child needs professional help. Symptoms may include regression to earlier behaviors (for example, clinginess or bed-wetting), difficulty sleeping, negative moods, poor concentration or withdrawal, changes in appetite, alcohol or drug use, or suicidal thoughts.

## Resources for help

- If you or your child need additional support or help, contact NYC Well, a confidential 24/7 helpline staffed by trained counselors and available in over 200 languages. Call 888-NYC-WELL, text "WELL" to 65173 or chat at [nyc.gov/nycwell](https://nyc.gov/nycwell) to speak with a counselor.
- NYC Well's website also offers a number of well-being and emotional support applications (apps) that can help you and your teen cope with a loss. For more information, visit [nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/app-library](https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/app-library).
- The New York State (NYS) COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline at 844-863-9314 is available from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week. The helpline is staffed with professionals who are there to listen, support and offer referrals to care.
- The Center on Addiction's Helpline offers support to those caring for a child struggling with drug or alcohol use. Call 855-378-4373, send a text message with your question or concern to 55753, or visit [drugfree.org/helpline](https://drugfree.org/helpline) to speak with a counselor.
- The [Child Mind Institute, Helping Children Cope with Grief](#) and [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) can offer additional guidance on what to say to a child to cope with grief.
- The [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) has guides for teachers, school personnel and parents specific to grief for children during a pandemic.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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