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# How to Help Children Cope with the Death of a Loved One During the Pandemic

Grief support may be harder now, but it is not impossible. Here are some ways to help children cope, even at a distance.

By Amanda Krupa, MSc | May 20, 2020

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Many kids across the country are grieving for a loved one right now, as COVID-19 has taken the lives of more than 90,000 people in the United States. But without funerals and an inability to hug loved ones, the coronavirus pandemic has changed many traditional ways of grieving.

So how can you help a child cope with the death of a loved one during this time? While much depends on a child's age, personality, and coping style, there are plenty of socially distant ways for you to "be the one who gets it" to a child who is grieving. Experts weigh in how to help, even from afar.

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## Focus On Their Age & Development

Infants and kids under age 3 have an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality, while preschoolers may believe death is reversible or that someone who has died will come back. Marci Wheeler, MSW, a social work specialist at the Indiana Resource Center for Autism, recommends not using phrases such as "going to sleep," "passing away," or "we lost Grandma" when explaining death to preschoolers and children with autism, who also have difficulty understanding abstract concepts. You might say, "Grandpa's body stopped working and cannot be fixed."

Kids between 6 and 8 years old have a better understanding of death and personal health and safety. Yet, this can also create an unnecessary sense of responsibility for a person's death and misunderstandings—especially during the pandemic.

"If Grandma gets COVID-19, kids this age may believe it is because they went to visit her and did not change their shoes," says David J. Schonfeld, M.D., F.A.A.P., a developmental-behavioral pediatrician and director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, which coordinates the Coalition to Support Grieving Students. "If Grandma dies, they are going to feel responsible and we don't want that." Find out what your child already thinks and knows. Be honest if you do not know the answers about COVID-19. (Keep in mind, this age is probably going to ask you repetitive questions in their search for answers.)

Tweens between 9 and 12 have a more mature understanding of death and may bury their own feelings as they attempt to protect and help grieving parents and family members. Those outside of the family can be extremely helpful for this age group, making them feel safe to share. The same goes for teens, who also may have difficulty expressing emotions.

No matter the age group, though, it's important to be patient. "Just like adults," says Thomas Demaria, Ph.D., a clinical child psychologist on Long Island, New York, "children have their own pace in the grief process—we should not try to rush it."

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## Seek Virtual Grief Support

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Everyone in the family deserves the right to be heard and supported during these unprecedented times—and oftentimes outside help is beneficial. Many children's bereavement programs across the country are also providing virtual groups and/or individual support. The [National Bereavement Resource Guide: State by State Listing](#) is an easy way to identify an organization providing local support.

This may be especially necessary for kids who demonstrate a desire for any big life changes immediately following the death, such as getting a tattoo or quitting school, says Dr. Demaria. Children with pre-existing mental health conditions, such as [anxiety disorder](#), may also be more challenged in their ability to cope with a loss.

You can also check with the guidance counselor or social worker at school and your pediatrician—they can be wonderfully supportive, and usually know of excellent therapy professionals in your community. Parents can also reach out to the local hospital social worker, psychologist, or child life specialist for recommendations.

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## Lean on the School Community

"Whenever there is a loss in the family, teachers and school communities can be tremendously helpful because they can be a bit emotionally distant," says Dr. Schonfeld. That's why parents may want to reach out to the school community for additional support.

Scarlett Lewis knows how important that can be. Through her nonprofit, [Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement](#), Lewis created a [free healthy grieving program](#) in partnership with the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation. Her inspiration? Her son, J.T., now a sophomore at the University of Connecticut, who was 12 when his little brother, Jesse, was murdered during the Sandy Hook tragedy in December 2012.

J.T. didn't want to go back to school afterwards and school administrators and educators never offered him grief support. "They said they were 'afraid' of him saying he wasn't OK. They didn't think they had the skills and tools to handle it but looking back J.T. would have liked people to acknowledge his loss and validate his grief. I know it would have made him feel special."

Lewis wants everyone to know—especially right now when everyone's emotions are running high during the COVID-19 pandemic—that it is not necessarily about having the skills and tools. "It's about having the courage to be present with a child at whatever stage of grief they are in and validating their grief."

Right now, being "present" for children who are grieving can mean a lot of different things. Even though each culture has its own traditions, rituals, and different ways of grieving, offering support is still possible.

Along with his team, Dr. Schonfeld produced [Supporting Grieving Students During a Pandemic](#), a guidance document teachers and school communities can use for this very challenge. It can also be helpful for parents. It includes links to various training modules and resources, such as [Impact on Learning and Grief Triggers](#), which offers insights and recommendations relevant on how students can handle triggers, and [Death and School Crisis](#), which covers when the death is a school staff member or a fellow student.

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## How Loved Ones Can Send Support

**Post a message on social media.** "Social media does have some advantages when it comes to grief support," says Dr. Demaria. This is especially true for kids who may not be ready to respond to calls or texts and are overwhelmed by the loss. An expression of sympathy on social or an offer to listen when ready does not put pressure for an immediate response.

But Dr. Demaria encourages everyone to reframe their expressions of sympathy: "People tend to repeat 'I am sorry for your loss,' on social media," says Dr. Demaria. It's more helpful to say something personal that expresses feelings like "I'm really sad about the loss of your grandmother."

**Send mail.** For children who are too young to read or are not on social media, sending them a letter or a drawing will emphasize strong support.

But again, it's beneficial to make the messages more personal. For example, if you knew the person who died, discuss a special memory like how you will miss them cheering at baseball games. And if you didn't know the person, acknowledge that and the fact you know how much they meant to the child. End with a sweet message like "I wish I could give you a hug right now, but know I am only a phone call or a text away if you ever want to talk."

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