

Childhood Grief and Loss in the Time of COVID-19: A Guide for Caregivers

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has increased the possibility families may experience the loss of a loved one. In this time of COVID-19, childhood grief can be even more devastating and challenging for caregivers to navigate as they may also be grieving. Responses to **grief** are natural and common to loss but in time these responses decrease in intensity and the individual is able to return to their routines. On the other hand, for someone experiencing **complicated grief**, their responses do not decrease and can eventually impair their daily routines.

Below is information to support caregivers with children who are grieving during this unprecedented time.



WHAT DOES LOSS AND GRIEF LOOK LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Children at different developmental stages have different understanding of and reactions to death.
- Somatic or physical symptoms are common throughout all ages including issues with sleeping, eating, or elimination.
- In early childhood, behavioral issues may manifest as irritability and temper tantrums. As children get older, this may take the form of anxiety, depression, isolation or antisocial behavior, and anger or self-destructive choices.



HOW DO CHILDREN UNDERSTAND DEATH AT DIFFERENT DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES?

AGE	COGNITIVE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND DEATH
BIRTH-2 YEARS	Infants cannot understand death. However, they feel loss through separation and the interruption of attachment development. They are also susceptible to and influenced by the moods of their caretakers.
2-6 YEARS	Toddlers also are not able to conceptualize death but they understand that the person has “gone away”. They often experience “magical thinking” believing that the person is coming back, can be wished back into existence, are sleeping for a long time and will wake up, or that they somehow caused the death.
7-11 YEARS	Children at this age have the ability to concretely conceptualize death. They often believe that death is final but do not necessarily understand that is universal. They may ask about the details of the death or the state of the body.
12-14 YEARS	At this age children are able to fully conceptualize death. They often yearn to be with the deceased or have a preoccupation with the life of the person who died.
15-18 YEARS	Teens at this stage are able to conceptualize death in the same way as adults. However, the way we process and understand death changes throughout our lifetime based on our environment and experiences.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN WHO ARE GRIEVING?

- Children who are not supported in an age appropriate way often make incorrect assumptions and are at a higher risk for complicated or traumatic grief.
- Complicated grief can have long lasting effects on the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children.
- Social distancing and the removal of children from their everyday routines during this time can compound the effects of complicated grief.

 **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RESILIENCE?**

- Resilience is the ability to thrive when facing challenges and changes.
- Experiencing the death of someone close can be very challenging for children but it can also be an opportunity for caregivers to teach them resilience and help them build healthy coping strategies and behavioral patterns.
- Parental support is a major protective factor for children as they face grief and loss.

 **WHAT CAN CAREGIVERS DO?**

- Children who feel supported both by their family and community members during the grieving process significantly decrease their chances of developing complicated grief.
- Social support may seem elusive in this time of physical distancing but parents can work to make sure children stay connected to their communities and the memory of the people they have lost. Some ways include:
 - Reinforce feelings of safety and remind children they are loved.
 - Use technology to keep children connected to their extended families and communities at large.
 - Include children in memorials and create personal expressions of commemoration, such as memory boxes, etc.
- To help children to build resilience:
 - Encourage their sense of competence by empowering them to make their own decisions.
 - Teach them effective coping strategies such as the ability to reframe situations.
 - Create opportunities for them to contribute to the family and community and to recognize these contributions.
- When specifically addressing COVID-19 and its effects on your family, caregivers can:
 - Talk to children openly and truthfully in an age appropriate way about the pandemic.
 - Give children room to ask questions and be ready to answer their questions.
 - Model stress management and self-care.

 **RESOURCES FOR CAREGIVERS**

There are many resources for caregivers on how to talk to children about this pandemic, how to support them while they are grieving, and how to foster resilience. Look for resources in preferred languages.

- Talking to children about COVID-19: https://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/Docs/latest_news/2020/Coronavirus_COVID19_Children.pdf
- Video resource for families dealing with loss during the pandemic: <https://www.trihealth.com/dailyhealthwire/health-topics/well-being/grief-support-for-children-amid-covid-19>
- This resource is not specifically about COVID-19 but it offers recommendations about how to talk to children about serious illness and the grief around it: <https://www.aappublications.org/content/31/6/31.6>
- Supporting children suffering from grief due to COVID-19: https://www.dougy.org/docs/Grief_during_COVID-19.pdf
- Building resistance in children during this time: <https://good-grief.org/resources-for-resilient-parenting/>
- Promoting resilience during quarantine: <https://childhoodresilience.org/resources-1>

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