

Supporting Children and Teens During COVID-19

Managing Feelings of Grief



The COVID-19 pandemic can be stressful for children and teens. Some experts believe our response to COVID-19 mimics grief. Mental health professionals from the Sutter Care at Home Children's Bereavement Art Group have advice to help support our youngest loved ones during this public health crisis.

How to Talk to Your Child About COVID-19

- Talking to children about COVID-19 is similar to talking to children about grief. Caregivers should use concrete, simple and developmentally appropriate language to explain concepts.
- Follow your child's lead. Allow them to ask questions and keep an open dialogue. When talking to teens, you might say, "Are your friends talking about coronavirus? What are they saying?" For younger children, you might say, "Have you heard grownups talking about a new sickness that's been going around? What have you heard?"
- Talk openly and honestly to children about what's happening.
- Share that COVID-19 is also called the coronavirus. Corona is Latin for "crown" because under a microscope, the virus looks like a crown.
- Mention the symptoms of the virus are similar to a flu (cough, fever, shortness of breath). Most people who get the virus have mild symptoms.
- Explain that the virus isn't very common in children.
- Let them know if someone feels very ill, they can go to the hospital.
- Empower your child by letting them know they can help by practicing good hand washing, not touching their face and sneezing into their elbow.

- Let them know this time of quarantine and social distancing will pass – that it's temporary.
- Explain social distancing as, "We need to mostly stay home right now, and stay at least six feet away from people in public so that we protect ourselves and others."
- Tell them that a pandemic can be explained as, "People all over the world are sick with this virus."

Possible Behavior Changes From Your Child

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children.
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (e.g., toileting accidents or bedwetting).
- Excessive worry or sadness.
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits.
- Irritability and "acting out" behaviors in teens.
- Poor school performance or avoiding schoolwork.
- Difficulty with attention and concentration.
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past.
- Unexplained headaches or body pain.
- Use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

How to Support Your Child

- Provide structure and a daily routine. Your family's normal schedule may be turned upside down right now. Work together to establish a new daily plan that includes mealtimes, bedtime, work time, playtime, creative time and exercise. Set small goals every day. Do your best to attend to your child and your own body, brain and emotions.
- Share your feelings while also providing reassurance. Let your child know their caregivers are still there to keep them safe. Other helpful statements include: "There are lots of amazing grown-ups, such as doctors and nurses, working hard to keep us healthy" and "We'll get through this together."
- Model good self-care by taking breaks, getting plenty of sleep, exercising, eating well and staying connected to your friends and family members.
- Encourage your children to express themselves through art, writing, talking things out and physical activity. For ideas, including art activities to do at home, go to our Sutter Care at Home Children Bereavement Art Group at: sutterhealth.org/services/pediatric/child-bereavement-smcs
- Take advantage of any extra time you have during the quarantine for cuddles, hugs and play. Physical closeness and care go a long way in helping children feel safe and loved.

Ways to Help Children Deal with Death

- If you're grieving a death during this COVID-19 period, honor your loved one by looking at photos and sharing memories about them.
- If you've suffered a recent loss, the shelter-in-place order to modify or cancel public funerals, burials or celebrations of life may bring additional challenges to the grieving process. Consider having a small service in your home with your children. Include

your children in the planning by letting them select or read important poems or passages, selecting photos or displaying drawings for their loved one.

- If you're no longer able to visit the gravesite or cemetery, consider setting up a special place at home for photos and special items. This will help your family feel connected to your loved one.

Reach Out for Help

Sutter Health EAP provides employees and family members with referrals to licensed, professional therapists who can help with personal problems. We also provide referrals for caregiving, legal and financial resources. EAP services are free and confidential.

SOURCES AND USEFUL INFORMATION:

- "Coping with Change and Loss": indd.adobe.com/view/924b5436-fca0-4a15-901a-9233134766e4
- "How to Talk to Children About the Coronavirus Pandemic": centerforloss.com/2020/03/children-about-cornavirus
- "Stress and Coping": cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html
- "Stop a Worry Becoming Catastrophic: How to Talk to Your Kids About the Coronavirus": theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-kids-how-to-talk-to-children-death-virus-expert-guide
- "Just For Kids: A Comic Exploring the New Coronavirus": npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus
- "When Your World Is Already Upside Down": dougy.org/docs/Grief_during_COVID-19.pdf