

# HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT DEATH DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

As if being in the middle of a global pandemic isn't complicated enough, many people will experience the unfortunate reality of having a family member or loved one die – whether it's from COVID-19 or other means. It can be difficult as adults to process this news and even more confusing for kids. With the uncertainty of the future and loss of routine right now, the added stress of a death is a lot for any of us to bear. Here are some things to consider talking to a child or teen about the death of someone they love during this pandemic:

**It's a myth that bringing up death, whether COVID-19 related or otherwise, will cause an increase in worry in youth.** Although children and teens are NOT miniature adults, they are acutely aware of the differences in their world right now. Talking about a death in an age-appropriate way is not going to add anxiety – quite the opposite will happen. You'll be able to model that it is safe and OK to talk to a trusted adult about grief and everything that accompanies it.

**Try to be as concrete as possible without using euphemisms.** Depending on developmental age, saying things like “they passed away,” “they got sick,” or “they're in a better place” can be confusing for a child to understand. Children might start thinking whenever they get a virus or have a cough, they are going to die like their loved one did. They also might wonder why they cannot join the person that they loved in this “better place.” Being as concrete and direct as possible with words like, “I want you to know that your person died. I know you love them very much and I want to be honest with you. I am here for you and will answer your questions if you have any” can be incredibly helpful and can cultivate safety between you and a child.

**Reassure children's immediate safety without giving false promises.** It's important for youth to hear “I am here to protect you,” or “We are safe right now,” even if they don't verbalize that they are scared.

**Provide as accurate, up to date information as you have available to you about the death.**

Whether the death is COVID-19 related or not, children and teens are going to want to fill in gaps in stories whenever they can. Even with the best of intentions, shielding young people from the truth often leads youth to create their own truth which can be far worse than reality. Stick to the facts of the death as much as you can. Younger children may need to have the concept of death explained repeatedly while older kids may wonder about what happens to the person after death. It is okay to not have all the answers- acknowledge your limitations and find answers to those questions together.

**Ask about their feelings.** Allowing youth to share their feelings and acknowledging that they can feel more than one feeling at the same time and can also feel nothing at all shows your constant support of them and helps open lines of communication in the future. Validate that there is no right or wrong way to feel after a person dies.

**Children and teens are the experts of their own grief experiences.** Children and teens often want to explain to you how they are feeling and may wonder how you feel. Use these conversations as an opportunity for them to teach you about their own grief experiences as well as model healthy grieving.

**Limit social media exposure.** There is a lot of misinformation, especially when it comes to COVID-19. Limiting social media consumption can prevent everyone from having to absorb information that is often times sensationalized, or, that can be triggering. Be sure you are obtaining information from a reliable source.





**Remember – grief is unpredictable.** Everyone experiences grief differently, even close family members. Depending on the age of a child, don't be surprised if, after letting them know that someone died, they turn to you and immediately say something like, "Oh, ok. Can I go play that video game right now?" Children are good at compartmentalizing grief; actually, they tend to be far better at it than adults.

It's important to remember, too, that a lot of the grief children and teens are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic will not be solely reserved for the death of someone in their life. They will be grieving the loss of school, of social events, of sports seasons, or, simply, the loss of getting to be a kid like before.

**Create rituals or memorials to honor the person who died.** Right now, we may not be able to honor people who die with a traditional funeral or memorial service or even gather with friends and family, but rituals are important when we are grieving. Holding a memorial via Zoom, creating memory books, looking at pictures of the person or making their favorite food at home can be meaningful for kids and families.

**Be careful not to set false expectations.**

Anticipating that a child will want to, or be able to, talk about the death all day every day is not realistic. They have their limits. If you open the door for safe conversation, they will know that they can talk to you about their grief if and when they need to.

**Finally, it is important to remember there is no script for grief, especially during these unprecedented times.** As a caring adult in a child's life, you are not always going to be able to come up with the right thing to say. That's because there is no right thing to say right now. What you can do is allow for children and teens to know that you care, that they can talk to you, and that they can trust you.

Questions or comments?

Contact  
Uplift Center for Grieving Children

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[www.upliftphilly.org](http://www.upliftphilly.org)

Find more COVID-19 resources at  
[www.upliftphilly.org/uplift-at-home](http://www.upliftphilly.org/uplift-at-home)

