

COVID-19 Grief & Loss: Practical Guide for Parents & School Personnel

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Traditionally, we think of grief after someone has died. In the current global COVID-19 pandemic crisis, we are experiencing different types of grief. We may be grieving because a loved one died, but we may also be grieving the loss of our normal everyday lives. Grief can become complicated, especially when death is sudden and unexpected, it involves a child or close family member, other stressors like financial hardship are present, or one has become socially isolated from loved ones. It is important to know that grief is a process and not a one-time event. Due to the ongoing and complicated nature of grief, it is important for parents, caregivers, and school personnel to understand student grief and ways to support them.

WHAT DOES GRIEF LOOK LIKE?

Pre-schoolers	Elementary	Secondary (Middle & High School)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting out behaviors (tantrums, refusal to comply) • Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling asleep, waking up throughout the night, nightmares, wanting to sleep with parents) • Increase or decrease in appetite and /or physical activity • Increased fear/anxiety • Regressive behaviors (bedwetting, increased attachment to caregiver, thumb sucking) • Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty completing tasks or following directions • Lack of interest in previously pleasurable activities • Acting out behaviors (defiance, arguing, hitting, yelling) • Withdrawing, heightened irritability • Feelings of eminent doom (recurring thoughts of worry, preoccupation with acquiring Covid-19) • Difficulty getting along with others family members • Disrupted sleep (difficulty falling asleep, nightmares, waking up throughout the night). • Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches) • Regressive behaviors (whining, clinging to caregivers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased conflict with peers and familial relationships • Focus and/or attentional difficulties • Decreased motivation and interest in previously pleasurable activities • Acting out behaviors (rebellion, heightened agitation) • Withdrawing and/or isolating from family and/or peers • Feelings of eminent doom (recurring anxious and fear centered thought, preoccupation with acquiring Covid-19) • Possible substance abuse (drug and alcohol usage) • Engaging in risky behaviors • Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling asleep, waking up throughout the night, sleeping for extended periods). • Somatic complaints (chest tightness, headaches, stomachaches)

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HOW TO RESPOND TO YOUR CHILD’S GRIEF OR LOSS?

Pre-schoolers	Elementary	Secondary (Middle & High School)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Label your child’s feelings if they have difficulty expressing how they feel. Play may also be a way for younger children to express grief. • Provide consistency and establish routines that are predictable. • Provide reassurance and patience. • Limit exposure to triggering events (media coverage, etc). • Monitor your own stress level and need for support. • Understand your child may require additional attention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalize grief and encourage your child to express their feelings. Help them identify their feelings and positive ways to cope. • Give your child time to share their experience and “tell their story.” • Be honest and provide age-appropriate explanations. • Encourage your child to ask questions. • Reassure your child that they are safe. • Engage your child in soothing physical activities, such as stretching. • Monitor and limit media exposure. (Answer specific questions your child may have). • Facilitate and encourage your child to reach out to friends over the phone, FaceTime, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen empathetically and express concern. • Encourage your child to express their feelings and thoughts about the situation. • Help your child identify supportive and positive friends and adults. • Maintain a daily routine. • Reassure your child that they are safe and provide honest answers to their questions. • Model positive coping strategies for your child (deep breathing, journaling, reaching out to loved ones).

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR STUDENT?

- Have developmentally appropriate discussions about grief and loss (i.e. loss of normalcy and day to day routines, grieving the loss of social experiences and interactions, grieving a loss due to COVID-19 etc.)
 - **Pre-schoolers** - *“Sally died. This means her body has stopped working and will not work again. When people die it can make us feel sad- and that’s ok.”*
 - **Elementary** - *“Mr. Williams, the band teacher, has become sick. We don’t know when he will return, but we can really support him by continuing to wish him and his family well. Would you like to make a nice card for him and his family?”*
 - **Secondary (Middle & High School)** – *“Losing someone close to you can be hard. You may be sad, angry or many other things- and that’s ok. It’s normal. If you want to talk about how you feel, I’m here to listen.”*
- Model healthy grieving by sharing your feelings of sadness related to the loss.
- Be open and honest. It’s okay to say “I don’t know” or “I have the same question” in response to questions.
- Seek professional mental health resources if you are concerned about how your child is coping.

- Help your child positively reframe the way they look at what they’re experiencing.

Student May Say	Positive Reframing
“I should be coping better.”	“Most people are having trouble adjusting to this major event. I am doing the best I can.”
“I cannot stand being stuck at home.”	“I am making a good choice for my own safety and the safety of my family.”
“I’m not safe.”	“ <i>Feeling</i> unsafe is a common feeling right now, but that doesn’t mean I am actually unsafe. I am doing everything in my power to stay safe in my home.”
“This isn’t fair!”	“Sometimes bad things happen, but we are all in this together. Let’s plan for the future!”

PRACTICAL WAYS TO TAKE CARE OF YOU AND YOUR STUDENT/FAMILY

- Be patient and flexible with yourself as a caregiver. It’s okay to deviate from your schedule occasionally and to let some things go.
- Utilize this time to connect with your family and create positive memories.
- Remember to engage in healthy habits (drink plenty of fluids, take time to reflect, exercise, listen to music, create art projects, treat yourself, create a documentary for your family)
- Reach out to friends and family.
- Seek professional help for yourself if needed.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES	WEB BASED RESOURCES
Adapt Community Solutions 1-866-260-8000 Children’s Emergency Room 214-456-7000 Dallas Behavioral Hospital 972-982-0900 Dallas County Mental Health Hotline 214-743-1215 Dallas Social Services 211 Metrocare Services 214-381-7070 Metrocare Services-Adult 214-275-7393	https://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits/grief https://www.dougy.org/ https://grievingstudents.org/ https://childrengrieve.org/ https://www.nasponline.org/ https://www.nctsn.org/ https://www.samhsa.gov https://www.naminorthtexas.org/ https://www.apa.org