

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENS WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS DYING IN A HOSPITAL OR CARE FACILITY



If you're faced with telling a child or teen that a family member or friend in a hospital or care facility is likely to die soon, you might be feeling confused and overwhelmed. It's never easy to share this news, and especially so when there might be factors that prevent you and your family from physically visiting the person who is dying.

We know it can be a lot to read through multiple sources of information, so we compiled this resource as an overview of how to support children and teens before, during, and after someone they care about dies in a hospital or care facility. **Given the current COVID-19 global health crisis, we've included suggestions for what children, teens, and families can do when they aren't able to visit or see the person who is dying.**

A lot of this information is sourced from our full Tip Sheet collection which you can access [here](#).

## SHARING DIFFICULT NEWS

### Begin the Conversation

Talking with children and teens about the situation is not easy, but there's a good chance they already have a sense that something is happening. Because this conversation is tough to have, parents and caregivers might put it off, hoping there will be a perfect time to talk

about what's going on. Unfortunately, there is rarely a perfect time. What's important is having the conversation so that children and teens can be part of the process your family is facing and make informed choices about how they want to be involved in individual and family decision-making when a family member or friend is dying.



### Use open, honest, and clear language

Be honest and give clear, accurate information using words your children and teens can understand. Avoid phrases like "not getting better," "won't be here much longer," or "passing on," because they can be confusing, especially to younger children. As hard as it is to say, when you use the word "dying" it helps children understand what is happening. **Rather than "Daddy is really sick," name the illness so children can differentiate between someone getting sick with a cold and sick with cancer or COVID-19.** If the family member is hospitalized due to an accident or other sudden event, share the information you have in clear, concise, and developmentally appropriate language. Young children need basic, concrete information about what they can expect to

happen and when. Teens might need and want more details, especially as the family member's death approaches. By being open, you model for children and teens that they can talk honestly and trust you will tell them the truth, even when it's really hard to talk about.

### **Acknowledge and normalize their feelings and thoughts**

Try to listen without interrupting or minimizing whatever children are thinking and feeling. Let them know it's normal to have a lot of different feelings and thoughts when someone they care about is dying. "You're feeling really scared that Mommy doesn't know how much you love her. It's really normal to want people to know just how much we care about them." You can help children and teens learn to express their experiences by naming your thoughts and emotions. "I'm noticing how short my temper is — when I'm scared, I sometimes show it in anger. I'm working on taking three deep breaths when I feel upset."

### **Model being okay with not knowing**

Children and teens will ask questions you won't know the answers to and that's okay. You can appreciate their questions, tell them you don't know the answers, and then assure them that if you find out more information, you will let them know. This teaches children and teens that it's important to ask questions, even questions that we may not have answers to.

## **HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS BE INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS DYING**

Just like adults, children and teens benefit from feeling included and given the opportunity to be involved in decisions related to communications, rituals, and practices when a family member is dying. Share with children and teens that it is likely the person will die and ask if they would like to do or say something now that they have

that information. Some children and teens may want to verbally share their thoughts or feelings with the person who is dying, while others may choose to make a card or drawing, write a letter, or leave a treasured item, such as a stuffed animal or favorite blanket, with the person. If the person who is dying is unable to have visitors, or the child or teen has chosen to not visit in the hospital or care facility, there are still other ways for them to communicate with the person who is dying. If a family member, social worker, or medical professional can be at the bedside of the person, they can read the child's or teen's letter, share their picture, or facilitate a phone or video call.



If children and teens aren't sure what to say, write, or draw, here are some prompts that might help them get started:

- I love you...
- I will miss you...
- I'm glad you've been my...
- I will not forget...
- One thing I've learned from you is...
- I'm really sad that you are dying. Thank you for...
- I wish...
- A favorite memory I have is...

Children and teens can also sing songs or tell stories to the person who is dying. Remind them that even though their person might not be able to respond, they can likely hear them, and their messages matter.

If time allows, family members can record a compilation of favorite music and family stories that can be played for their person in the hospital.

**In this time of the COVID-19 global health crisis and physical distancing requirements, families might face the heartbreaking inability to be with the person who is dying. You can acknowledge how painful and unfair that feels and work to create rituals in your own home that help children and teens feel connected while also saying or doing what feels right for them before the person dies, even from afar.**

Some ideas include:

- Sharing stories about the person. You can do this as an immediate family or invite others to join virtually using video chat. Consider recording the stories.
- Prepare a meal together and eat the person's favorite foods.
- Create a playlist of songs the person likes or that remind you and your family of them. This playlist can be a collective one that members of the extended family contribute to as well.
- Invite children and teens to read or share what they would say to the person if they could visit them in person or talk to them on the phone.
- Create a place in your house with pictures and other items connected to



the person who is dying. Let children and teens know it's a spot they can go to talk to the person as if the person was there, or they can just have a place to go to think about them. For young children, consider adding a play telephone so they can act out a conversation with the person.

- Create a collective online photo album where family members and friends can add photos and captions. This can be turned into a hard copy book to share with children and teens.

It's important for children and teens to have the opportunity to honor the person and to choose if and how they want to engage in activities and conversations with and for the person before they die. If they choose not to, let children and teens know that this is okay and there will be ways for them to do so in the future, even after the person has died, if they want to participate.

## **SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND TEENS AFTER THE DEATH**

### **Listen**

When it comes to grief, especially for children and teens, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, or try to fix it. What's more helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating. When we truly listen, we often find out what they're wondering about or struggling with.

### **Create safety through routine**

When someone dies, it can make the world feel out of control and unsafe. One of the best ways to create safety for children and teens is to provide routine and consistency — while also leaving space to be flexible and responsive to their needs. Some examples might include sticking with wake up and bedtime routines, scheduling regular play time, or even just a one-on-one daily check-in with your children and teens.

### Be open to different ways of grieving

Grief looks and feels different for everyone. Some children and teens may cry quietly and want to be left alone. Others might have difficulty sitting still or being by themselves. Some children and teens will not outwardly show reactions, which can be challenging for adults who are supporting them. There are many ways to process and express grief and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. **While everyone's grief is unique, many children and teens experience increased fears around health and safety. This might be especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more tips on helping children and teens cope with fear, see our [Tip Sheet](#).**

### Provide outlets for self-expression

While some children and teens talk about their experiences, many express themselves through art, writing, music, or creative play. You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of pictures, or writing a letter. Some children and teens will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression, so be sure to create time and space for big energy play like running outside, sports, or messy creative projects. For downloadable activities and writing prompts, visit [tdcschooltoolkit.org/kids](https://tdcschooltoolkit.org/kids).

### Talk about and remember the person who died

Talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. It's okay to use the person's name and share what you remember about them. By bringing up the person's name, you give children and teens permission to share their feelings and memories. Children and teens often like to keep objects that belonged to the person or connect them with the person in some way. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures a child or teen might like, ask which ones are important to them. Involve children and teens in activities, but without forcing them. These may include visiting a grave site, going to a special place, sharing a favorite meal, lighting a candle, sharing memories, or any activity that feels right for your family.

### Get extra help when needed

While most children and teens will not require professional services to address their grief, some will benefit from additional support. This might mean attending a grief support group or connecting with a therapist. If you are interested in grief support groups at The Dougy Center, please call 503-775-5683. For information on grief support groups beyond our service area and other helpful resources on loss and grief, please visit our website at [dougy.org](https://dougy.org). If you need or your child needs immediate crisis support, please call the 24/7 Crisis Line, 1-800-273-8255 or text HELLO to 741741.



#### Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences. Our *Pathways* program provides support for families living with an advanced serious illness.

#### The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 45,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](https://dougy.org) or [tdcbookstore.org](https://tdcbookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.



# WHEN YOUR WORLD IS ALREADY UPSIDE DOWN

## Supporting Grieving Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Global Health Crisis

How rapidly and radically things are changing in our world and everyday lives, in ways we couldn't imagine even a month ago. At that time, children, teens, young adults, and adult caregivers in our grief support groups were saying things like:

- *Since our person died, our whole lives have been turned upside down.*
- *People just don't understand. They think we should be over it or move on.*
- *It is so helpful — and in some cases, a lifesaver — for us to come to The Dougy Center and be with others who understand.*

And now, in the midst of personal loss and life changes, we're needing to alter and disrupt our daily lives even more. Although physical distancing doesn't mean we can't still find ways to connect, it's hard to substitute technology for in-person hugs, tears, and nods of understanding. On top of this, the person we would have turned to for support in all of this might be the person who died.

We'll practice physical distancing for the sake of our children's health and our own, and with awareness of the global severity and our interconnections, but we can still acknowledge

that this is all really hard.

We are using the term physical distancing rather than social distancing in recognition that it's important to try and stay connected while being physically apart. There are so many changes to our daily lives, including our kids being out of school (and still wanting to play with each other and be kids), our inability to travel freely, fears about spreading or getting the virus, and disruptions in our jobs, income, and economic concerns. These just add to what families were already grappling with in their grief.



We fervently hope that ultimately some good will emerge out of this global tragedy, but right now, grieving families face greater risks of social isolation, including their grief being minimized or forgotten in the face of this global health crisis. Here are some comments we're hearing from grieving families:

- *I thought things could not possibly get any worse after De'Angelos' death and now this...*

- *We barely got to acknowledge that Patricia was gone and now it feels like our grief must take a back seat to the other issues thrown in our faces.*
- *After Cala died, my children were already struggling in school. Now they're going to miss so much class time. Will they ever catch up?*

The question now is, how do we possibly stay healthy and connected with the changes and anxiety added to what we were already dealing with? Here are some ideas to consider:

### Engage in family self-care

Engaging in family self-care means attending to your physical, mental, and emotional health in whatever ways are accessible to you and your children. Children and teens are tuned into the adults in their lives and are watching for cues and leadership about how to respond. Grieving children and teens are already more likely to be concerned about health and safety, and these fears may grow stronger during this time. Engaging in family self-care is one way to help them cope with these worries.

#### **Think: body, brain, heart**

**Body:** What can you do to move your body each day, even if you're staying at home? Stretching, jumping jacks, chair dancing, and push-up challenges are some options. Remember to drink water, eat nourishing food, and get enough sleep.

**Brain:** Consider limiting media consumption and implementing practices to support your nervous system such as taking a few deep breaths, meditation, and this simple exercise to get grounded in your senses. You can do this on your own or make it into a game with your children:

Take a moment to notice your surroundings and find 5 things you see, 4 things you hear, 3 things you feel, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you can taste.



**Heart:** Make room for whatever emotions and thoughts come up for you and your children. Whatever each of you are feeling or thinking, consider responding with something like: "It's okay that you're feeling this way/thinking those thoughts. I'm so glad you shared them with me. What do you think would be most helpful in this moment?" Take time to attend to your own emotional state, so you are aware of what you bring to interactions with your family. Cultivate compassion and remind yourself, "I'm doing the best I can in this moment."

Here are some resources for self, family, and community care during this time:

[Movement Activities for Grief Tip Sheet](#)

[Self-Care Planning Tip Sheet](#)

[Grief Out Loud Ep. 106 Grief & Anxiety - Claire Bidwell Smith, LCPC](#)

### Establish routines

Consider creating new daily routines and rituals. You can work as a family to set a schedule and small goals for each day. Routine and consistency can help establish a sense of control in a situation that feels very out of control. Examples of mini goals might include writing a book, organizing a room/drawer/



closet, reaching out to one friend or family member a day, doing an art project, writing in a journal, or taking a daily walk.

Here's an idea for making a schedule

together. Use a big sheet of paper or white/chalk board that everyone can write on. Block out times specifically for family self-care activities for the body, brain, and heart. Include things that happen at regular times (meals, walking the dog, bedtimes) so there is a foundation of structure built into each day. In creating a schedule and focusing on routines, remember to also be flexible. When we are stressed, our ability to focus can be compromised, so if your children need extra unstructured time, make space for that too.

### Reach out and stay connected

Under the best of circumstances grief can feel isolating, so during this time it's especially important to cultivate social connections. Thanks to our digital world, there are many ways to stay connected even with physical distancing. If you have access to technology, schedule video chats or phone calls with friends and family. Explore websites, podcasts, and groups on social media. We've included a list of grief specific ones at the end of this resource. If you don't have access to technology, consider writing letters and postcards.

### Be honest with kids about what you know and don't know

Encourage children and teens to ask what

they're wondering about. Just as with grief, there are going to be questions you have the answers to and ones that you don't. It's okay if the answer is, "I don't know." Reassure children that as soon as you know more, you will tell them. Children and teens who have access to technology are likely to look up information and share with their friends. It can help to have a conversation about identifying reliable sources to decrease misinformation.

### Make time for grief & remembering the person who died

With so much happening, children and teens might worry there's no time or space for their grief. Consider setting aside time to talk either as a family or one on one with kids and teens about what's coming up for them in their grief. Potential discussion starters include:

- "How is your grief behaving today?"
- "What do you miss the most about them today?"
- "What's a funny/favorite memory you can think of?"
- "What do you think they would be doing/saying during this time?"
- "How would things be different for us if they were here?"
- "What's helping you the most?"

[See this Tip Sheet for more question ideas.](#)

If visiting a cemetery or other location is part of your family's grief routine and you're not able to go because of physical distancing requirements, consider creating a space in your home with photos and special items where you and your family can connect with the person who died.



## Embrace diversions

Remind children and teens that it's okay to still have fun and take breaks — both from grief and concerns about the global health crisis. As a family, you can create a list of ways to have fun, including solo and group activities. Examples include board games, puzzles, watching silly movies and videos, scavenger hunts, dance parties, making playlists, or having a talent show. If you have access to technology, consider inviting friends and family to participate remotely in the talent show.

These are just a few tips for supporting grief for yourself and your family during this health crisis. With these suggestions in mind, it's important to note that many factors go into whether these tips will be accessible for people, including physical mobility, financial resources, work constraints, and emotional and physical vulnerabilities. Adapt these as needed for your family and if you need additional resources, support, or information, please contact us.

For additional tips on supporting grieving children and teens, please visit our website [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org) for Tip Sheets, podcast episodes, activities, guidebooks, and workbooks.

## Resources

### Online resources for parents/caregivers

[Hot Young Widows Club](#)

[Soaring Spirits](#)

[Modern Loss](#)

[What's Your Grief](#)

### Podcasts & online communities

[Grief Out Loud](#)

[The Widowed Parent Podcast](#)

[Coming Back](#)

[Terrible, Thanks for Asking](#)

### Online resources for children & teens

[The Dougy Center's School](#)

[& Community Toolkit](#)

[SLAP'D](#)

### About COVID-19

[Talking to children about COVID-19](#)

[Coping with stress during infectious disease outbreaks](#)

### Additional resources

[Trauma Informed Oregon](#)

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

Need more support? Text 741741 or call 1-800-273-8255 to reach someone at the Crisis Line 24/7.



# The Dougy Center

The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

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