

Supporting Your Grieving Child through the COVID-19 Pandemic

For most of us, the novel coronavirus has flipped our day to day lives into an unrecognizable form. With children out of school or e-learning, and many adults out of work, working from home, and/or working extra hard in essential jobs, things are not as we know them. We are also trying to navigate new information and recommendations seemingly daily, and coping with the stress and anxiety COVID-19 brings. For the grieving person, this sudden, unprecedented change may feel familiar to you. You may know what it is like to have everything change in an instant. And while this familiarity may make some feel more prepared for this new “not” normal, it can also trigger our grief in new ways. As your family faces the changes brought by COVID-19 consider these suggestions for supporting your grieving child.

1) These Changes May Trigger their Grief

Experiencing so much change so rapidly may trigger grief in your child. For many children experiencing the death or serious illness of a significant person, unknowns, heightened stress and anxiety, and confusion surround them. The COVID-19 pandemic brings unknowns, stress, anxiety, and confusion back into our daily lives. These familiar feelings may trigger memories, emotions, and fears your child experienced in the acute phases of grief.

In recognition of this, be extra aware of how your children are relating to their grief. Create opportunities for them to share their thoughts and questions about this experience and listen openly and without judgement. Normalize that grief comes in waves, and it is normal to experience increased grief emotions during this stressful time.

2) Children May Experience Heightened Anxiety about Others Dying

With the health risks associated with COVID-19, it is completely normal to be fearful about the health and safety of our loved ones. Children are not exempt from this, and for grieving children who have experienced the tragic death of a significant person in their lives, this fear is likely to be heightened. Your child may have already expressed this concern to you, and if not, pay attention to their behavior and consider checking in with them if you think it is on their mind.

If you suspect your child is concerned about this, be sure to make space for them to talk about their fears and allow them to ask questions they may have. Listen non-judgmentally and normalize what they are feeling. Answer questions honestly which may include naming that there are many unknowns. Provide opportunities for healthy emotional expression, no feeling is a bad feeling, what matters is how it's expressed. Assure your child that you are all doing everything you can to keep them and your family safe and provide information about how to be a germ buster. This includes washing hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, avoiding touching your face, cleaning and disinfecting regularly touched objects and surfaces frequently, and covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue then throwing the tissue away. This also includes social distancing and minimizing contact with public spaces. Visit www.CDC.gov for a full list of recommendations. Empowering your child to be an active participant in reducing the

spread can help turn anxiety into actionable preventative measures. Together you can be a germ buster family!

It can also be important to limit the amount of news your family is consuming related to COVID-19. While it is important to follow the recommendations of your local government it can be overwhelming to try to consume all of the information about this virus. Be considerate of how much media your child is exposed to surrounding the virus. Your child may also be listening in on conversations you are having in an effort to ascertain your level of distress. Model healthy boundaries for your child by being thoughtful about everyone in your home's consumption of media surrounding COVID-19.

3) Routines Are Still Important

With children out of school, their daily routine is completely disrupted. While this social distance is necessary, it presents families with challenges of how to adjust to having children home. For all children, but especially for the grieving child, having some routine is critical to maintaining some sense of normalcy. Since their regular routine has been changed so drastically, it is important for your family to put some structure and routine in place during this time. Good places to start include set mealtimes, set learning/reading times, and boundaries around screen time. Other ideas are a daily afternoon walk and/or evening family board game. Bedtimes and bedtime routines should also be maintained as much as possible. Providing some structure in your child's day can make a big difference in emotion regulation and providing a sense of normalcy for your child. In a time when so much is changing each day, having consistency in some aspects of your family's days goes a long way.

While the changes caused by COVID-19 present new challenges for families there are also some potential advantages for grieving families and children. For example, staying home can provide families an unexpected gift of time together, creating space to connect, process, and slow down. Creative expression is also one of the best ways to process grief, and with less structure in our days there may be more space to foster creativity. Grievers may also be getting a break from the stress and guilt of trying to keep up with societal expectations while feeling overwhelmed by grief. If any of this is true for you we are glad you are getting this space to process your grief. You deserved this space all along.

We hope some of the above suggestions are helpful for you. Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions, comments, or support requests. Safe Crossings Program remains available to grieving children and teens across King County. Our main contact number is (206)-749-7723. Wishing you well in the days ahead.