

Duke Hospice Children's Bereavement Services

How to support children and adolescents through loss and COVID-19

As we navigate this new time, we want to recognize the challenges COVID-19 creates for grieving children, and provide resources to help caregivers support them. COVID-19 brings a lot of uncertainty, along with losses like separation from friends and the loss of planned school and sport events. Sadness, anger, and confusion that are common in grief and might be amplified. The experience may also re-trigger past losses or feelings children had after losing a loved one.

How to support your child:

Validate their feelings. Children need their feelings acknowledged, accepted, and respected. When feelings are not acknowledged, they can often escalate. One way you can acknowledge feelings is by showing empathy, such as telling them: "I can see that you are sad about missing your event."

You don't have to agree with your child's feelings to acknowledge them. Feelings are not inherently right or wrong -- they just are -- though children often need support and guidance from caring adults about how to cope. At times your child's actions may need to be limited. You might say: "I can see you are really mad that we can't go to the movies but tell me with your words."

Remain calm and reassuring. We recognize this is also a challenging time for you, and it's important to make sure you're finding ways to take care of yourself. Your child will take their lead from you.

When discussing COVID-19, follow your child's lead during the conversation. Asking questions about what they've heard can help clarify misconceptions. Be honest and talk in age-appropriate language. In this time of uncertainty, some questions don't have answers. It's OK to say "I don't know." By talking about this with children, you open the door for communication and give your child a place to express their thoughts, questions, and concerns.

Here are some links with more information regarding talking to children about coronavirus: [Center for Loss](#) and [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#).

Keep schedules as routine as possible. Routines provide a sense of normalcy for children and help them feel in control and supported. Allowing for time alone, together as a family, and doing activities they enjoy can support their grief process.

Limit TV/social media exposure. Having a constant source of information can be overwhelming for children.

Use this time for some family activities. Taking about your loved one and remembering them together can be helpful to children. You'll find resources below that promote emotional expression. Consider ways you can spend time together.

Follow Mr. Rodgers's advice to "Look for the helpers." Focus on positive things that are happening and point these out to your children.

Encourage coping skills for overwhelming emotions. Try relaxation, deep breathing, coloring, or movement activities, such as walking.

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Creating a supportive environment and facilitating activities

Use the following activities to explore emotions and facilitate. They have suggested age ranges, but you are an expert on your child and will know which activities will be most beneficial for them.

Tips to create an environment of comfort and support as you facilitate these activities:

Consider the time of day. When do you and your child have the energy and space to devote to an activity?

Think about your environment and where you'll do the activity. Some activities can be a bit messy, so consider your own comfort with mess and the best place in your home for them. Turn off the TV and put away electronic devices so you can focus on the activity and your child won't be distracted.

Respect your child's privacy. The activity might allow them to express something through writing or drawings. They might not be comfortable sharing these thoughts and feelings with others. Respect their privacy by giving them space when needed. Don't look over their shoulder and honor their wishes if they don't want to share.

As adults, we can often become task oriented. Sit with your child, get on their level, and create a space for them to open up to you.

When facilitating an activity, use inviting language: "I invite you to come participate with me." Offer choices like different materials or suggest a few projects. Let them choose what to do that day.

Approach your discussion with a sense of curiosity and use nonjudgmental language. Statements like "I wonder..." or "tell me more about your picture" can open up discussion.

Provide positive feedback. Sharing appreciation for your child's engagement, how they did something, or a specific way they handled an emotion in a healthy way helps reinforce positive behaviors and builds their confidence. Try to not just say "good job," but instead be specific about something you noticed.

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Exploring Emotions

Feeling Check-In (Preschool/Elementary School Age)

This activity is a great way to discuss your child's emotions. Use this daily check-in to learn how they're doing, especially during this time of isolation.

Materials

- Colored paper or crayons/markers
- Paper
- Scissors (optional)
- Glue (optional)
- Brad, Velcro, or clip (optional)



Activity

1. Brainstorm words that represent common feelings, like happy, mad, sad, scared, surprised, or disgusted.
2. Use colored paper and scissors or draw with markers to make different sections for different emotions. You can discuss why your child chose different colors for different emotions.
3. Make an arrow or icon that can be moved around the board for your child to identify their mood. Attach it by using a brad or Velcro. If you don't have these supplies, you can ask your child or use the colors they identify to show how they're feeling. You can also use a clip to acknowledge a specific feeling.

This activity can be used as a daily check-in by moving the arrow/icon/clip or by using the colors your child chooses.

Ask questions like: "How are you today?" or "What color is today?" It could be a green day, if they feel happy and they choose green as their color for happy, as in the picture above. Dr. Seuss' book "My Many Colored Days" can be a great resource when working on this activity. If you don't have access to this book, there are many YouTube videos of the story online.

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Exploring Emotions Feeling Cards (Middle School Age/Adolescents)

These cards can be used as a check-in to talk about feelings or as a way to identify something helpful when emotions can become strong or overwhelming.

Materials

- Slips of paper or paint swatch
- Markers or colored pencils
- Collage materials: old magazines, different colored/design papers
- Scissors
- Glue/Glue sticks
- Hole punch and ring clip (optional)



Activity

1. Brainstorm words that represent common feelings: happy, joyful, sad, upset, frustrated, disgusted, confused, worried, uncertain, embarrassed, lost, happy, enthusiastic, loving, optimistic, mad, angry, annoyed, scared, afraid, energized, focused, or peaceful.
2. Using slips of paper or paint chips, select one for each emotion from the discussion.
3. Use collage materials, scissors, and glue to decorate each slip of paper. These decorations can represent a feeling when it is experienced, what causes that emotion, or what comes to mind when hearing the word.
4. (Optional) Attach cards together using a hole punch and clip.

When working on these cards, your child might want space. If they seem open to talking, you can ask open-ended questions to help them explore emotions. You can encourage conversation by asking questions:

- “What is that feeling like for you?”
- “When you are experiencing this emotion, what feels better to you?”
- “What lead you to choose that picture to put on that emotion card?”

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Exploring Emotions

Feeling Charades (Preschool/Elementary School Age/Middle School Age)

This activity can be fun and lighthearted, but also act as a resource to help your child learn about their emotions and explore feelings during this time of grief and loss.

Materials

- Slips of paper or a [printout of face cards](#)
- Bowl



Activity

1. Brainstorm words that represent different feelings and write them on slips of paper. You can also use a printout of different face cards for younger children. Some ideas you could use (depending on their age) include: happy, joyful, sad, upset, frustrated, disgusted, confused, worried, uncertain, embarrassed, lost, happy, enthusiastic, loving, optimistic, mad, angry, annoyed, scared, afraid, energized, focused, or peaceful.
2. Place strips/cards in a bowl.
3. Take turns pulling out a strip/card and acting out the emotion. The other person guesses what is being acted out.
4. Explore different emotions with your child and what they're feeling during a time of isolation and grief.

As you act out emotions, take a moment to talk about them. Use open-ended questions:

- What emotion do you show when feeling isolated? About the loss of your loved one?
- When you are feeling this emotion, how would I know?
- What would be helpful for me to do or say during this time?
- What are you able to do to help yourself when you feel angry, sad, or scared?

You don't need to explore every emotion with your child, but you can use this opportunity to explore what you've seen from your child in a nonthreatening, supportive way.

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Change / Shock / Loss

Family Drawings (Preschool/Elementary School Age/Middle School Age/Adolescents)

This activity can help your child process feelings that change (or don't) while experiencing grief.

Materials

- Paper
- Crayons, markers, pencils, pen

Activity

1. Create a safe, calm, and comfortable environment for your child to complete writing prompts. Your child can pick this place: their room, the kitchen table, or outside.
2. Fold a piece of paper in half.
3. On one side, draw a picture of your family before the death you experienced. On the other side, draw a picture of your family after.
4. Provide an opportunity for sharing and discussion.

It can be helpful to create your own drawing and share with your child. Invite them to share if they wish. If they're hesitant, it can be helpful for you to share about the changes you've seen in your family. Some changes might bring feelings of sadness or things you miss. These can be challenging emotions, but provide validation. Know this is normal in times of grief and change.

This activity can be helpful to explore ways the death has brought your family closer or to talk about new things that bring you joy. This can also be a time of reflection on things you continue to do as a family, areas that have not changed, or things you would like to start doing together.

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Change / Shock / Loss

I Wonder, I Wish, I Hope / What Helps (Middle School Age/Adolescents)

This activity can help your child process feelings that change (or don't) while experiencing grief. It can help your child process what helps them in the moments of change.

Materials

- Paper
- Crayons, markers, pencils, pen

Activity

1. Use two pieces of paper. On one piece of paper write "I wonder, I wish, I hope." On the other, write "What helps?" in the center. Write down all the ways you take care of your heart, body, brain, and spirit.
2. Create a safe, calm, and comfortable environment for your child to complete the prompt. Your child can pick this place: their room, the kitchen table, or outside.
3. Give your child time to reflect and answer the questions.

It can be helpful to answer your own prompt and share with your child. Sometimes children want to keep their work private. Respect their privacy if they choose to not share. You can provide validation of the ways you've seen them overcome challenges so you can dream together about new things to come.

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Exploring Anger / Emotional Release

Anger Paper Target (Preschool/Elementary School Age/Middle School Age/Adolescents)

This activity is a great way for your child to think about what makes them angry, then release that energy in a positive way physically, mentally, and emotionally. When implementing this activity, talk with your child about how all kinds of emotions are OK and the healthy ways to release them.

Materials

- Large piece of blank paper
- Markers
- Tape
- Napkins/toilet paper/sponge
- Bowl of water

Activity

1. Take a large piece of paper and draw a target.
2. Tape the paper on a wall (inside or outside) while being mindful this activity includes water.
3. Encourage your child to write things they are angry about on the target.
4. Dip the napkins/toilet paper/sponge in water and throw the paper at the target.

Explore what it feels when the sponge/paper hits the target by asking questions:

- How do you feel when you throw the sponge/paper?
- Do you notice any changes in your body when you are angry?
- If you use washable markers, the things that are written on the target will fade or smear, what is that like to see these things that make you angry disappear?

When your child finishes, share how anger is a common emotion, especially in grief, and then brainstorm healthy ways to release or express that anger. Healthy releases could be:

- Ripping paper or squeezing Play-Doh
- Stomping feet or giving themselves a big hug
- Performing a physical activity like jumping jacks, going for a bike ride, or play catch.
- Taking a deep breath or squeezing a stress ball

[Adapted from Duke Child's Life Emotions When Grieving]

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Exploring Guilt / Fear

Worry Monster (Elementary School Age/Middle School Age)

When it's hard for your child to talk about their emotions, encourage them to make a "worry monster" who can take those worries and troubles away. Children often experience feelings of guilt or fear, making it difficult to open up about vulnerable feelings. A "worry monster" can be a tool that your child uses to release fears and feelings. This activity can help identify triggers by writing or drawing them out.

Materials

- Empty tissue box
- Paper (construction or plain)
- Crayons, markers, pencils
- Googly eyes
- Pipe cleaners
- Tape or glue

Activity

1. Use an empty tissue box to create a "worry monster." Allow your child to decide if they want to make it into a monster or another type of animal.
2. Cover the tissue box with paper, leaving the opening for a mouth.
3. Decorate the box using paper, googly eyes, pipe cleaners, etc.
4. Write or draw feelings and thoughts that worry you on a piece of paper and put them inside the "worry monsters" mouth, where the "worry monster" will hold onto them. Explain to your child how the "worry monster" can eat the worries away so that the worries are not always on your mind.
5. Place the "worry monster" in a safe place where your child can easily write/draw their own feelings and place them in the box at any time.



Worries can sometimes feel really big. It can be helpful to talk about them or write them down. Prompt your child with questions like:

- What worries are you feeling?
- What should your "worry monster" hold onto for you?
- What does it feel like in your body when you have a worry?

[Adapted from [Art of Social Work & Duke Child's Life Emotions When Grieving](#)]

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Exploring Guilt / Fear

What Can I Control (Middle School/Adolescents)

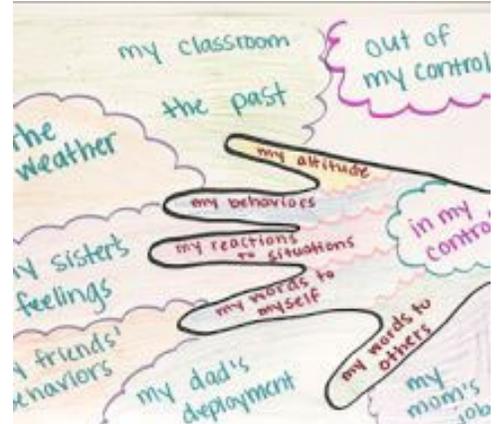
This activity helps process and understand what is in our control and what is not, and how it's important for emotional well-being.

Materials

- Paper (construction or plain)
- Pencils
- Markers

Activity

1. Take a piece of paper and trace your hand.
2. On the inside of the hand, write "In my control."
3. On the outside of the outline, write "Out of my control."
4. Encourage your child to write or draw the things in their control on the inside of the hand.
5. On the outside of the hand, write things that are not in their control. It could be things like: my parent's job, weather, death, missing events from COVID-19, etc.
6. When finished, lead a conversation about what is in our control and what is not in our control in life. Encourage your child to share their feelings and thoughts with you.



Remember when holding onto things, you can feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and out of control. In grief and other hard times, a lot of things feel outside of our control. By thinking through the things we have control over and what we can do to help ourselves, we can create a visual reminder for when we are overwhelmed. Examples may be: my behavior, my thoughts, my words, the way I react to others, ways they choose to spend their time, etc.

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Exploring Sadness / Loneliness

Emotion Buddy (Preschool) / Comfort Stones (School Age /Adolescents)

When child experiences sadness, feels alone, and becomes withdrawn, it's comforting to have something that your child can literally hold on to, reminding them they are not alone and these feelings are normal. Depending on age and preference, you can create with an emotion buddy or comfort stone. They can be big or small and always travel with them, fitting inside a pocket or stored in a safe place, like by their bed. When feelings become overwhelming, your child can rub or hold onto the comfort item knowing they are not alone.

Emotion Buddy

- Yarn
- Googly eyes (optional)
- Tacky glue (optional)
- Scissors



1. Choose a color of yarn and wrap it around four fingers. Do not wrap around your thumb. Wrap your fingers 70 – 100 times.
2. Cut a piece of yarn of about 9 inches and slide it between your middle and ring fingers. Tie the cut piece of yarn around the wrapped yarn tightly.
3. Cut the yarn in a half circle, making tassels, and shape the yarn tassels to your liking.
4. Optional: attach googly eyes with tacky glue.

Comfort Stone

- Stone
- Craft paint, paint markers, sharpies

1. Pick a stone that feels comfortable to hold in a hand.
2. Clean off the stone and let dry.
3. Paint the stone with a positive word or phrase. This should be something encouraging to bring comfort when feelings become overwhelming.



Explore your child's sense of safety by asking questions like:

- What things make you feel safe?
- How can I help support you when you feel sad or lonely?

[Adapted from [Ideal Pin](#), [Creativity in Therapy](#), & Duke Child's Life Emotions When Grieving]

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Remembering / Memories

Light Up Jar (Elementary School Age/Middle School/Adolescents)

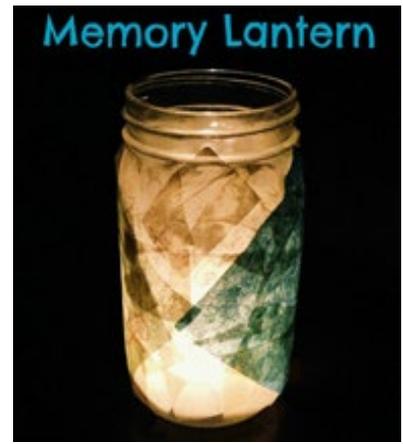
This activity is about reflecting on memories of your loved one. You can incorporate your toddler/preschooler in this activity by allowing them to color or make designs on the light up jar.

Materials

- Mason jar
- Tissue paper
- Markers (recommended to write on tissue paper to prevent tearing)
- Glue or mod podge
- Paintbrush
- LED candle / battery-powered string lights

Activity

1. Cut up pieces of tissue paper of different sizes: small pieces to cover the mason jar and large pieces to draw/write memories.
2. Ask your child to reflect on memories shared with their loved one who died. Have them write/draw these memories on the larger tissue paper. Talk about these memories. Repeat as many times as needed.
3. Paint a small area of the jar with glue or mod podge, cover it with small pieces of tissue paper. Repeat until jar is covered.
4. Brush a light coat of glue/mod podge on top of the tissue paper and place the larger tissue paper with the memories written/drawn on top. Note: Too much glue or mod podge can cause the marker to bleed.
5. Let the jar dry and then place a LED candle or battery-powered string lights inside.
6. Place in a special place like at the kitchen table or at your child's bedside.



Duke Hospice Children's Bereavement Services

Remembering / Memories

Letters / Memory Box (Preschool/Elementary School Age/Middle School/Adolescents)

Create a safe place for the storage of memories, letters, items, etc. Your child can create a box unique to them or you can create one as a family. Start this activity for your infant/toddler/preschooler by creating a memory box or writing to them with letters about your current family experience. Share these memories and moments with them when they are older.

Looking through the memory box can help you all feel close and connected.

Materials

- Box with lid
- Mod podge
- Photos, stickers, etc.
- Scissors
- Paint, markers, crayons, pencils
- Colored paper or scrapbooking paper

Activity

1. Measure a box and cut a piece of paper to cover each side and top.
2. Decorate the box with photos, stickers, paint, markers, crayons, pencils.
3. Apply mod podge to the box and glue down the paper.
4. Place a layer of mod podge over pictures/coloring designs on the box to seal everything to the box.



Reflect on your memories and the fun things you did as a family, or what your child enjoyed doing with your loved one. What things remind them of their loved one? Do they like to see these things or have them stored somewhere for safe keeping, like the box?

These memories help create continued connection to someone who died. That person might not be physically present, but you can discuss how they continue to live within you, the ways they influenced who you are, and how you want to remember them. These conversations can start by asking questions like:

- What is your favorite memory with your loved one?
- What do you want to remember about your loved one?

[Graphic from [Country Living & Duke Child's Life Express Emotions When Grieving](#)]

Some activities to support building new memories during COVID-19

Building new memories together is a helpful part of the grief process. With COVID-19, it can be challenging to find ways to connect when you are only at home. Use these resources and tools to build new memories and cope with any additional stress that comes from being isolated.

Just For Fun:

- Start new traditions: Taco Tuesdays, noon dance parties, joke or riddle of the day. Play board games, color, cook/bake, try some karaoke.
- Enjoy time outdoors: go for a walk, draw pictures with sidewalk chalk, play catch, blow bubbles, plant a garden.

Relax:

- Try meditation through [Headspace for Kids](#).
- Turn on Yoga for Kids -- many videos are available online.

Stay Active:

- Have dance parties.
- Make a scavenger hunts by finding things of the same color, things that start with different letters through the whole alphabet, hide action figures, cars, dolls around the house.
- Watch online videos such as [GoNoodle](#), play a new game through [Active for Life](#), or participate as a family on a [Tik Tok Challenge](#).

Continue Learning & Exploring:

- Virtually visit [zoos](#), [aquariums](#), [nature exhibits](#), or [museums and art galleries](#) that have online feeds. Find something new you want to learn such as a new language, magic tricks, or how to code (sites available for kids [Scratch](#), [Tynker](#), [Code.org](#)).
- Use online educational resources such as [Scholastic](#) and [Kids National Geographic](#)

Get Creative:

- Use anything you have around the house and see what you can build or make together. Try an art project from [Go Paint Love](#) or [Arts for Life](#).
- Read, write, and tell stories. If you need some books check out your local library's online format or [Story Line Online](#).