

HOW TO HELP A GRIEVING CHILD DURING COVID-19

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"What to do if you are a parent of the child, and your partner is in a hospital or has died?"

ROLE OF THE 'KEY PERSON'



The Key Person is the 'primary attachment figure for the child' — the person who is emotionally closest from the child's point of view

If the primary attachment figure is intact, the child is well buttressed to handle grief

"WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE FATHER OR MOTHER DISAPPEARS SUDDENLY?"

- Let the child know about hospitalization. Don't keep it secret
- Let the child know about the deteriorating condition (if applicable) and passing away of the parent
- If the mother has passed away, let another member of the family take the role of mother (usually it is grandmother in urban families)
- Let the child realize that they are supported and looked after by actions NOT by repetitive sermons
- Whatever belief about "after death" existence is accepted by the family should be offered to the child
- Do not stop a child from crying, or say that the parent is in "a better place". From a child's point of view, there is no better place for a parent than with the child. Let the child express their grief freely in a manner they find okay
- Offer help at bedtime. Many kids can't sleep by themselves at such times
- Let the child settle down with family before exposing to visitors
- Routine is healing. Let the child carry on with school, play, study activity as soon as possible. Don't stop the child from meeting friends if the child so desires
- Do not go overboard in caring for the child. Infantilizing them is not a good idea
- Let siblings help each other
- Children feel safe when they see confident adults around them. Sense of continuation is important for them
- Some young children ask "who is going to feed me? Who will take me to the toilet? Who will tell me a bedtime story?" These are legitimate needs of a young kid. They are scared. Give reasonable answers. Let them know that they are supported. It is never easy to talk to a bereaved child. Have faith in nature and our inborn ability to overcome a loss

”Do not shut the child away from the last visit to the dead. Give the child a choice if they want to see the dead body and pay their respects. This is important for the child. Children as young as 3 or 4 years have participated in the last rituals of their mother sitting in the lap of the father. This can help the child. Let the child move away if they are uncomfortable in the rituals. The choice should be the child’s ”

IF YOUR CHILD IS BETWEEN 0-3 YEARS

- Very young children do not have a comprehension of death or the permanence of death. The problem is if the mother has died
- The first piece of advice for the father is to find a substitute mother-like figure (a grandmother or a close relative in urban families)
- If the child searches for the mother, it is important to continue the story that was told to the child when the mother fell ill and was not there for the child. You have to continue the story for a few more days till the rest of the family finds its feet
- When the time comes to break the news, follow the general guidelines in Page 2



IF YOUR CHILD IS BETWEEN 3-15 YEARS

Follow the general guidelines in Page 2

YOUR CHILD IS BETWEEN 15-18 YEARS

- They are near adults who need to be treated like adults, where they are given all the information and nothing is hidden from them
- Use adult language while talking, and not infantilize them
- Communicate with them that the family is going through a very difficult time and needs the child’s help. Let the child handle responsibilities
- The older child is likely to be closer to the younger sibling so should be allowed to help with him or her

"What to do if you are a relative/family friend/neighbor of a child/children whose one or both parents are in hospital with COVID or isolated at home?"

IF THE CHILD IS ISOLATING ALONE AT HOME

Most parents feel confident leaving children at home for a few hours once they are about 11-12 years old. Some parents leave much younger children at home alone. The decision depends on the parents' experience of the child's self-control and problem-solving skills

- Set up a support group, with one or two main people designated to stay in touch with the child every three-four hours. This ensures children are not bombarded with monitoring phone calls from a lot of people who ask the same questions
- Food should be provided to the children every day, at the time planned with the parents or the child
- A child's routine should be maintained as near normal as the child is used to
- Normally children don't talk to adults on the phone (except their grandparents and one or two adults). Most of their contacts are with people their age and this should be allowed to continue
- Let the child realize that they are supported and looked after by your actions, not by repetitive sermons



IF THE CHILD IS LIVING WITH YOU



- If you are taking in a child, whose family is affected by COVID-19, you clearly are a parent or have naturally developed instincts about a child's emotions. Trust your instincts. Go ahead and help
- Simple things work for children-they need a daily routine that's close to what they are used to - activity, exercise, socializing, and entertainment. If you build this into their day, the children will be fine
- Make sure they have a safe place to sleep, a safe adult to be with, decent food, and rest
- Let the child help with housework, such as tidying up, picking up their plates, or helping in the kitchen since you might not get house help with a child from a COVID-positive family living with you
- Let the child ask questions or express their concerns freely in a manner they find okay

"What to do if you are a parent/relative/teacher of a child whose sibling/ friend/ neighbor is suffering from or died from COVID?"

- Speak clearly to the child about the situation. Don't keep it secret
- Do not shut the child away from the last visit to the dead or the last rites over Zoom. Give the child a choice if they want to see the dead body and pay their respects
- Let the child express their grief freely in a manner they find okay. Don't try to suppress their crying and grief because it is too much for you to bear
- Offer help at bedtime. Many kids can't sleep by themselves at such times
- Don't stop the child from meeting friends and playing if the child desires so
- Routine is healing. Let the child carry on with school, play, study activity as soon as possible
- Do not go overboard in caring for the child. Infantilizing them is not a good idea
- Let siblings help each other
- Children feel safe when they see confident adults around them. Sense of continuation is important for them



"WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF THE CHILD IS MIMICKING SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19, AND FEEL THEY HAVE THE DISEASE?"



Mirroring symptoms of adults is occasionally seen. It typically gets more caring for the child. It is a manifestation of the child's anxiety

- Let a doctor examine the child before declaring it otherwise
- Reassurance and distractions are good to manage these complaints by children

"When should you seek professional help for the child?"

- It is normal for a child to be distressed in the beginning but there will be a period when the child is able to sleep at night and eat properly
- If very severe distress continues beyond the first week and there are sleep disturbances, absence of appetite, long bouts of crying and you have an inconsolable child, you need to consult a professional
- If the child is showing suicidal tendencies: This may be in the form of a child rationalizing that they can be with their parent or parents if they die. The thinking could be, "My parent or both parents have died and, if I die, I will meet them in heaven"
- If a child develops very high anxiety about coronavirus or death that interferes with their routine
- A child developing many physical symptoms similar to parents but without a physical basis
- Exacerbation of pre-existing mental health issues like depression, OCD, etc
- Weight loss and persistent disturbances in sleep and appetite are red flags
- For younger children, inability to play alone or with friends, clinging to an adult or another child all the time, and severe emotional reaction when separated from that adult or child



"The fact that grief takes so long to resolve is not a sign of inadequacy but betokens depth of soul"

Donald Woods Winnicott

"What to do if you come across a child who has been abandoned on the street/bus stop/any other public space?"

Children will be seen on the street, largely, under two circumstances:

- There is nobody to look after the child at home — no parents, neighbors, or social support system. The child may belong to a migratory family where both parents have died or disappeared and there is no local connection
- More common is a professional gang, which may include the child's parents, taking advantage of the concerns around COVID-19



YOU SHOULD:

- Call the police or 1098
- Give only food and water, never money or anything valuable that can be exchanged for cash
- Under no circumstances, should you bring the child home. This is illegal and could be seen as abduction
- If you want you can sit there with the child in a public place and call the police



Emergency contacts

- Childline: 1098
- Central Adoption Resource Authority:
 - 011-26180194
 - carahdesk.wcd@nic.in