

STIGMA & SHAME

Supporting Children & Teens When Someone Dies from COVID-19



Supporting children and teens who are grieving after someone dies of COVID-19 can feel complicated and overwhelming. While any type of death can leave families feeling isolated, some are met with more shame and stigma than others. Suicide, substance use/misuse, homicide, and now COVID, are deaths that often evoke more disapproval or blame toward the person for how they died.

Here are some tips for helping children and teens to feel supported in their grief when they encounter this shame and stigma from others. Grief is unique to each person and every family. Please adapt these suggestions as needed.

There are many ways that family, friends, and the larger community may contribute to a sense of shame and stigma when someone dies of COVID-19. Here are examples of things people ask or say that can communicate a sense of stigma:

- Were they vaccinated?
- How did they get COVID?
- Did the person wear a mask?
- It's not even a real disease.
- It's their fault they got COVID because they chose to travel.
- Did they have underlying conditions?
- Who else in your family got it?
- Did someone you know give it to them?

Remember and talk about how the person lived rather than just about how they died. Their life was unique and important.

Children, teens, and their families will react differently to this implied stigma, but here are some common ways they can be affected:

- Being hesitant or nervous to talk about how their person died.
- Choosing to keep how the person died a secret or changing the cause of death in their obituary to avoid judgment from others.
- Experiencing a lack of opportunities to remember and talk about how their person lived when everyone is so focused on how they died.
- Experiencing shame, blame, and guilt.
- Feeling isolated or distancing themselves from others.

How to support children & teens:

- Be honest about the death and open to their questions. This helps children and teens know you can be trusted to tell the truth.

- Practice ways they can respond. Examples include, “I’d rather talk about my dad and not how he died,” or “I’m not comfortable answering that,” or, “That’s not a helpful question.”
- Remind children and teens that even though people might say insensitive or hurtful things, there’s nothing shameful about having had someone in their life die of COVID-19.
- Remember and talk about how the person lived rather than just about how they died. Their life was unique and important. Children and teens might avoid talking about their person who died to avoid hurtful or unhelpful responses from other people. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person’s life. Things like, “Your brother really liked going fishing with you,” or “Grandpa was such a great cook, I know you loved his pancakes.” Sometimes just remembering to say the person’s name can be very meaningful.
- Depending on the child’s age and developmental level, talk with them about factors that can contribute to stigma related to COVID such as racism, classism, personal beliefs, lack of access to medical care, and other issues relevant to your family and community.

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- Find ways to connect with others who have had someone die of COVID – this could be a support group, advocacy efforts, or remembrance events. Ask the child or teen if they have ideas for getting involved.

Regardless of people’s intentions in saying things that can be hurtful and insensitive, educating them about how these comments can negatively impact children and teens is a helpful step. You can share these tips with family, friends, teachers, and other adults in a child’s or teen’s life which can assist with reducing stigma and feelings of shame.

To access all the resources in the COVID-19 community toolkit, please visit dougy.org/covid.



The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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employeerelieffund.org/brave-of-heart-fund