OUR HOUSE
GRIEF SUPPORT CENTER

# EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN WHEN SOMEONE DIES DUE TO COVID-19

When someone dies of COVID-19 a child or teen may experience thoughts and feelings unlike those experienced when deaths are due to other causes. As with deaths due to other causes, it is important to be truthful about the cause and to provide age appropriate explanations to questions that children may have. Since this disease is new to human beings, feeling prepared requires knowledge. Like other parenting responsibilities, preparation can alleviate confusion that caregivers might experience if caught off-guard. The following are questions that children as young as 3 or 4 might ask:

What is COVID-19?

- Explain that it is a flu like other flus, but it has never been experienced by people before.
- That's why there isn't a cure for it or a vaccine to prevent it yet
- Scientists think that the first person who got COVID-19 caught it from an animal
- What makes it most different from other flus is that it is very contagious, and that's why it's important to wash hands frequently for at least 20 seconds, use hand sanitizer and face masks when coming in from outside or coming in contact with anything from outside the home, and maintain physical distance of at least 6 feet from people outside the home.

Children will naturally want to know why their person got the disease

- It wasn't their fault or the fault of their person who died
- The disease is highly contagious, so even if they were practicing physical distancing and using gloves and masks, the disease was passed to them by someone with COVID-19
- Because it's a new virus, there was no vaccine to prevent their person from getting the disease
- If the source of the contamination is unknown, tell the child that it is unclear how their person caught the disease

Children will want to know if you are going to get COVID-19 and die too?

- Although the disease is highly contagious, most people who get it recover and don't die
- Let your child know who would care for them if you were unable to care for them
- This will give them a sense of control over a situation that is making them feel scared and helpless

Unlike deaths due to other causes, when someone dies due to COVID-19 families might not have had an opportunity to say good-bye prior to the death or participate in a mourning ritual. Participation in mourning rituals help even very young children begin their mourning processes by offering them opportunities to witness what happens to bodies after the death. They also benefit from the support available from friends and family at those gatherings.

Some things you can do with children and teens until a memorial service or celebration of life can take place:

- Write or draw about the person who died
- Make an in-memory collage with paper, magazine clippings, or photos and glue
- Create a home altar or shrine
- Plant a tree or flower garden
- Make a memory box to gather keepsakes that remind you of the person who died
- Create an in-memory playlist of songs that remind you of that person

Understand that there's no right or wrong way to grieve and that grief is a unique process for each person. Each adult and child will grieve in their own way rather than according to any stage model. Role model for children that it is okay to talk about the person who died, and encourage them to come ask for support when they are feeling sad, mad, scared, lonely, anxious, guilty or worried because their person died.

Visit www.OurHouse-Grief.Org or call 888-417-1444 for resources and support.