

Supporting Children when a family member dies during Covid-19

Te Aroha Whakato, he aroha puta mai.

If kindness is sown, then kindness you shall receive (Maori proverb).

It can be a frightening and confusing time for children when a family member dies. The current challenges of being in lockdown due to Covid-19 have added further complexity to addressing the needs of children particularly when a family member dies from Covid-19 infection. When the usual practice of visiting a sick and dying family member is not possible, children miss out on the opportunity to talk with and farewell their loved one in person. They may also witness the added distress of family members struggling with these same restrictions.

When it isn't possible to visit a loved one who is dying it is important to create new opportunities to assist children in this process. The age of children will be a factor in how this might be addressed, as will family traditions and cultural practices. Children need honesty with lots of love, care and consistency. Clear and calm communication is important when talking with children.

The restrictions due to Covid-19 are likely to affect the following:

- Visiting a sick and dying loved one, whether that is at their home, hospice or hospital
- Tangi, cultural and religious practices, connecting with friends and family members, comforting each other, sharing food and memories together
- Attending the funeral
- If there is a burial, visiting the graveside

Even though so much may feel out of control, it is still important to remember that there are choices, and creative responses to these restrictions that can help alleviate further distress in families. Addressing the needs of children at this time can help reduce anxiety, confusion and helplessness.

It can be difficult to know what to say to children about Covid-19. However, they are likely to have heard it spoken about and seen it on TV and social media, so having honest, age appropriate conversations about it can help children make sense of this strange time. There are several useful articles suggesting how to talk with children about the virus listed at the end of this guide.

As school and many of the usual activities are also likely to be disrupted, establishing a set of routines at home can be reassuring and help things feel normal. These include simple things such as having breakfast together, creating a list of activities for the day ahead and sticking to usual bed times. Make a point of having special time with your children every day. Lots of hugs and cuddles reassure children that they are loved and safe.

Bearing in mind their age, it is important to be honest with children about what is happening and why things need to be different at the moment. This can help reduce confusion and fear. It is ok to say that you are sad that you cannot visit/attend the funeral, but that you will do something special at home instead.

Funeral directors will be able to assist families in finding some significant and safe ways to farewell and honour your loved one. For instance, it may be possible to record aspects of a funeral service, something that can be kept and treasured.

On-line connections: Join with significant others on-line at a particular time. Share stories about the loved one, sing together, share silence together. Children can be invited to draw special picture that can be posted on-line.

Memorials and Anniversaries: Plan a special celebration of your loved one's life for a time when family and friends can come together in person. Use this time to write special thoughts and memories, poems and to draw special pictures. As a family, create a special place in your home or garden to memorialise your loved one. Use photos, significant objects, drawings and poems. Have a candle that you can take turns to light.

Connecting across distance: Books such as 'The Invisible String' by Patrice Karst offer a useful metaphor for connecting across distance. This is a real human need; other options include making a pillow case from the loved one's clothing. If there is a family member in hospital, blowing a kiss to that person via video camera, and having a nurse draw a heart on the loved one's hand on the receiving end.

Some children will have lots of questions, and some won't; follow the lead of your child. Invite them to ask questions. Children sometimes want short, simple answers; sometimes it is good to ask them what they think. It is ok to say that you don't know why something sad has happened, but that you are here for them and love them.

Children might express fear of the virus, and that other family members may also die. Remind them that there are doctors, nurses and professionals working hard to keep them safe, and people are working all over the world to find a cure/make a vaccine. Remind them of the things they can actively do to keep safe, such as washing their hands and keeping distance from others when outside.

Children cope better if they feel useful: Asking a child to draw a picture for somebody, or help with household tasks help them to feel more useful and empowered.

How you manage this time directly affects how your child manages. Look after yourself. Remind yourself, as well as your child, that you will get through this.

Useful information:

<https://parents.education.govt.nz/essential-information/news-stories/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-novel-coronavirus/>

<https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/caring-for-someone/covid-19-information-for-caregivers/resources>

<https://www.psychology.org.nz/community-resources/emergencies-traumatic-events/>

<https://www.allright.org.nz/articles/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-covid-19>