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How to Talk to Children about Death During the COVID-19 Pandemic

David Schonfeld, MD, Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, offers advice to parents and caregivers on how to speak to children about the death of a loved one

28-Apr-2020 9:00 AM EDT, by Children's Hospital Los Angeles (/institutions/newsroom/5642/).

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David Schonfeld, MD, directs the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children's Hospital Los Angeles

Newswise — As the COVID-19 death toll in the United States climbs dramatically, parents and caregivers need to shy away from their protective instincts and prepare themselves for some open and candid conversations with grieving children about death. “For children to cope, adults need to help them understand that death is permanent and irreversible,” says David Schonfeld, MD, Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. “Kids need simple and straightforward answers, and an opportunity to share their feelings.”

At some point in their lives, all kids are going to experience the loss of a grandparent, a loved one, a friend, or hear about the death of a famous athlete or celebrity in the news media. “When that happens, kids generally want to talk about it; they want to engage parents in conversation. They want to understand it,” Schonfeld says. He adds that even very young children can understand death. “Research suggests that most children come to understand the concepts of death by 5 to 7 years of age; children at even younger ages can also understand death, especially after experiencing a personal loss.”

The pandemic raises its own set unique challenges for parents, given that families are self-quarantining, subject to safer at home orders, and normal routines, like school and work, have been disrupted.

“Social distancing measures, including lengthy school closures, increases the social isolation of grieving children, and makes it difficult to get support for your children,” says Schonfeld. “During the pandemic, families may find it very difficult to meet basic needs such as obtaining food, preparing meals, or providing supervision after the death of a parent or other caregiver, especially when the surviving adults are grieving and feeling overwhelmed by the pandemic.”

The usual outpouring of assistance, support, and companionship that would normally be provided by extended family, friends, neighbors, and members of the school community in the immediate aftermath of a death may not occur – funerals may need to be postponed and family and friends unable to visit, Schonfeld says.

Critical to the healing process will be helping children understand more about the current pandemic. “After the death of someone close, children often become more concerned about their health and that of others they care about,” he says. “The ability to reassure children that others close to them are healthy and not at risk of dying becomes challenging, even if the initial death was unrelated to the pandemic or any infectious disease. It becomes important to help children deal with their fears and concerns about the pandemic, in addition to any grief they may be experiencing after a personal loss.”

Schonfeld identifies four important concepts about death that are vital to understand for any child of any age.

1. Death is irreversible.

Children need to know that when people die, they don’t come back to life. It’s important to speak in clear, simple terms when explaining that death is permanent.

“We tend to make comments like, the person has ‘gone far away’ or is ‘up on the clouds,” which suggests the person will return,” says Dr. Schonfeld. “So, children may wait for the person to return or resent it when the person doesn’t return. They need to understand it’s

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irreversible so they can begin the mourning process.”

Schonfeld says that for very young kids using the phrase “all gone,” can help them understand that the person will not come back.

2. After death, all life functions end completely.

Make sure children understand that after death, all life functions stop working completely; the person’s body is not working any longer and the person doesn’t think or feel. Otherwise, children may worry that the person who died is still in pain or sad.

Schonfeld suggests explaining to children, “‘When a person dies, his or her body stops working and it doesn’t start working again. So, the person doesn’t feel pain, is not hungry, is not scared.’ You can state it very simply.”

3. Death is inevitable.

Children need to understand that all living things eventually die.

When talking to children about death, Dr. Schonfeld says it’s tempting for a parent to say “Oh, I’ll never die” or “I’ll always be there,” but that can lead to confusion for kids. “If kids think that some people are immortal, it may mean that people who do die were chosen to die perhaps because they did something wrong.”

Teaching kids that all living creatures die is something that can be broached easily in nature. “Kids see examples [of death] all the time, like if you find a dead bird or there’s a spider that dies,” says Schonfeld. These are opportunities in everyday life to discuss the basic concepts of death with kids in a way that shows it’s a part of the lifecycle, and it can be done before they experience any personal loss.

3. Explain the cause of death.

While it’s not necessary to share too many details of a person’s death, providing children with an explanation of how or why a person died will make it less likely for kids to feel scared or guilty.

“Kids need an understanding of the physical reason why someone died,” says Schonfeld. “Guilt is also an extremely common reaction to loss. Kids may think, ‘I did something wrong and that’s why someone I loved died. Then that means I can just never do that again, and it shouldn’t happen again.’”

Although children may not say they feel guilty, Dr. Schonfeld advises that it’s a good idea to address that feeling when talking about death. “I always presume the guilt may be there, so I reassure children that there wasn’t anything that they should have done or could have done that would have changed the outcome.”

General Tips:

- **Speak clearly and plainly to kids.** Don’t use euphemisms.
 - “It’s important that we use simple terminology and avoid jargon,” says Schonfeld. “The only reason that some expressions are felt to be comforting is they don’t really address what’s happened. But that’s just confusing for kids.”
 - Check back in with children to see if you’ve been clear; ask the child what he or she has understood about what you’ve said.
- **Ask children how they feel.**

Give them many opportunities to talk about their emotions and different ways to express themselves, such as through drawing or painting.

- **Allow children to have their feelings.**
 - “There is a tendency to try to cheer people up when they are grieving,” says Schonfeld. “When people witness grief, it makes them uncomfortable, so they want the person to stop demonstrating their distress. But we can’t really help kids cope if we don’t give them permission to express those feelings.”
- **Model ways to cope with grief.**
 - “Allow your child to own their feelings, and then share a little bit about your feelings and how you have coped with loss,” advises Schonfeld. “You can say, ‘I remember hearing about this [death or tragedy] and I felt very [sad]. What I did was I talked to your mom about it and that made me feel better.’”

“You’re sharing coping strategies like talking to people you care about or remembering a positive memory of the person who died,” says Schonfeld. “We need to demonstrate that we have the same authentic feelings and show kids some of the strategies we use to cope with those feelings.”

- **Understand that every child grieves differently.**
 - Young children don’t sustain intense feelings of grief for long periods, so they may cry or yell, then go play. This is typical for grieving children.
 - Teenagers may express grief as sadness or anger. This is also quite common
- **Teens still need to be parented.**
 - Teens tend to turn to their peers to talk about important topics—but during challenging times like grieving a death, teens really do need parent presence and discussion. “They may be reluctant to talk about it because it’s uncomfortable, or they may not want to burden their parents by upsetting them and raising the topic,” says Schonfeld. “But they still need an explanation of what happened, and support.”
- Schonfeld also advises parents not to forget that teenagers are still children; although they are more mature and responsible than younger kids, adolescents should not be the primary support system for grieving parents. “Adults need to look for outside support for themselves,” says Dr. Schonfeld.
- **Grief changes over time.**
 - “When someone dies, you lose that person and that is the primary loss. But you also lose everything the person could have done or might have done for you in the future; those are all the secondary losses,” says Schonfeld. “Young kids who lose someone significant don’t appreciate the secondary losses right away. As they get older, kids grow

into realizing all that they have lost. That's relevant because it doesn't matter how well you explain [a death] to a child at age 5 or 10, there will be more questions when they are older, 15, 20 or 25.

Additional resources:

--The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement has a [COVID-19 Pandemic Resources webpage](https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/covid-19-pandemic-resources/) (https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/covid-19-pandemic-resources/) that includes a 15-minute presentation for parents (https://vimeo.com/user109043156/review/402755052/1e4d641690) on how to talk to and support children during a pandemic.

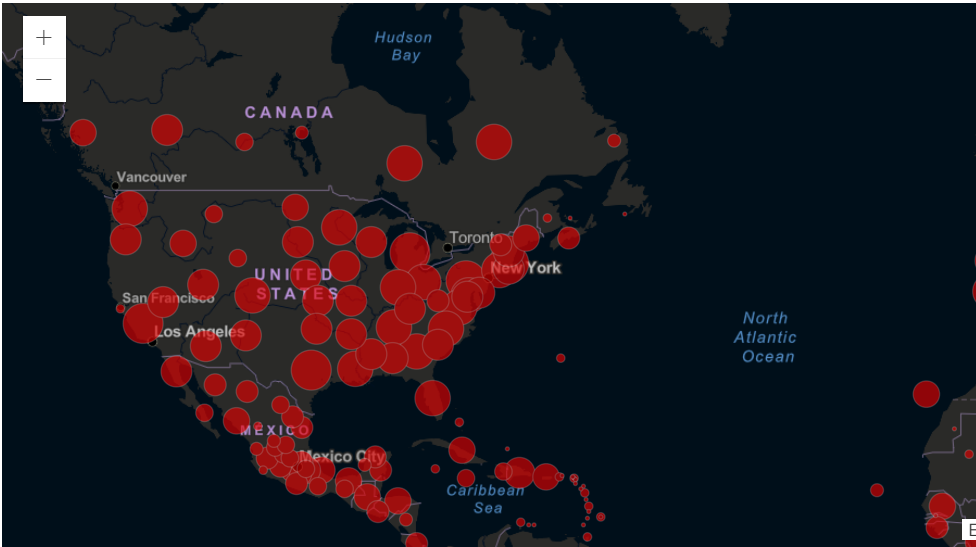
--Many children's bereavement programs across the country are quickly adapting to the pandemic by providing virtual groups and/or individual support. Contact the organizations in your area to see how they can assist. Check the [National Bereavement Resource Guide: State by State Bereavement Listing](https://elunanetwork.org/national-bereavement-resource-guide/resources/) (https://elunanetwork.org/national-bereavement-resource-guide/resources/) compiled by New York Life and eluna for a list of bereavement organizations in your state to identify local support for bereaved children and their families.

--Reach out to your pediatrician or mental health professionals by email or phone to obtain additional support. Ask your children's teacher to connect you with school mental health professionals who can talk with you by phone while schools are closed.

--For further information on how to provide support to grieving children during the pandemic, visit the [COVID-19 Pandemic Resources webpage](https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/covid-19-pandemic-resources/) (https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/covid-19-pandemic-resources/) of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. You can also [download](https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/loved-one-dies/) (https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/loved-one-dies/) a free booklet: After a Loved One Dies – How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them developed by the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](http://www.grievingstudents.org) (http://www.grievingstudents.org).

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Statistical approach to COVID-19 clinical trials aims to accelerate drug approval process

[/coronavirus/statistical-approach-to-covid-19-clinical-trials-aims-to-accelerate-drug-approval-process](#)) [MIT Press](#) ([/institutions/newsroom/21756/](#)).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have published a pair of studies in a COVID-19 special issue of the Harvard Data Science Review, freely available via open access, describing new methods for accelerating drug approvals during pandemics and for providing more accurate measures of the probabilities of success for clinical trials of vaccines and other anti-infective therapies.

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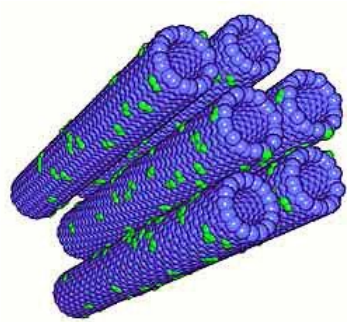
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This COVID-19 Detector Has Berkeley Lab Roots

[/coronavirus/bay-area-biotech-s-mobile-covid-19-detector-has-berkeley-lab-roots](#)) [Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory](#) ([/institutions/newsroom/2742/](#)).

How to Talk to Children about Death During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A technology spun from carbon nanotube sensors discovered 20 years ago by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (Berkeley Lab) scientists could one day help healthcare providers test patients for COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2.



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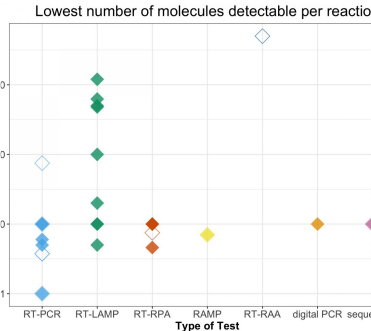
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Low Rate of COVID-19 Found in Women Admitted for Childbirth at Cedars-Sinai
[\(/coronavirus/low-rate-of-covid-19-found-in-women-admitted-for-childbirth-at-cedars-sinai\)](#) [Cedars-Sinai \(/institutions/newsroom/490/\)](#)

A study conducted by investigators at Cedars-Sinai suggests that universal testing of asymptomatic pregnant women in labor may not be necessary at every hospital. The investigation was prompted by reports from several large hospitals in New York City that nearly 14% of asymptomatic women admitted for childbirth had tested positive for COVID-19 during the early weeks of the pandemic. The women did not know they were infected.

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BIDMC-developed vaccines protect against COVID-19 in non-human primates, study finds
[\(/coronavirus/bidmc-developed-vaccines-protect-against-covid-19-in-non-human-primates-study-finds\)](#) [Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center \(/institutions/newsroom/673/\)](#)

Dan Barouch, MD, PhD (Center for Virology and Vaccine Research, BIDMC) and colleagues reported today in Science two studies of laboratory monkeys that suggest antibodies produced during recovery from COVID-19 provide immunity from the virus, whether triggered by infection or vaccine.

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\$5 Million Grant from Oprah Winfrey Accelerates Rush and City’s COVID-19 Prevention Efforts on West, South Sides
[\(/coronavirus/5-million-grant-from-oprah-winfrey-accelerates-rush-and-city-s-covid-19-prevention-efforts-on-west-south-sides\)](#) [Rush University Medical Center \(/institutions/newsroom/2670/\)](#)

Oprah Winfrey Charitable Foundation has donated \$5M to accelerate Rush and West Side United-led efforts to help West Side neighborhoods prevent and battle COVID-19

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Surviving the coronavirus while black: Pandemic's heavy toll on African American mental health
[\(/coronavirus/surviving-the-coronavirus-while-black-pandemic-s-heavy-toll-on-african-american-mental-health\)](#) [University of Michigan \(/institutions/newsroom/130/\)](#)

ANN ARBOR—Black communities in the United States have been disproportionately affected by the number of coronavirus cases and deaths. At the same time, white nationalist activities have increased in the last months.Riana Elyse AndersonRiana Anderson, assistant professor at the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health, discusses how these trends are affecting the mental health of African Americans.

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COVID-19 tests compared
[\(/coronavirus/covid-19-tests-compared\)](#) [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory \(/institutions/newsroom/2875/\)](#)

In an important, comprehensive, and timely review, an expert team from the University of California Berkeley details the methodologies used in nucleic acid-based tests for detecting the presence of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

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Innovative Approaches to Cost-Effectiveness Analysis in Healthcare
[\(/coronavirus/innovative-approaches-to-cost-effectiveness-analysis-in-healthcare\)](#) [ISPOR—The Professional Society for Health Economics and Outcomes Research \(/institutions/newsroom/21111/\)](#)

ISPOR—The Professional Society for Health Economics and Outcomes Research held its third and final Virtual ISPOR 2020 plenary session this afternoon, “On the Road to Enhanced Cost-Effectiveness Analysis—New Directions, New Milestones.”

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Released: 20-May-2020 3:10 PM EDT

Tip of the Iceberg: Existing Racial Inequalities in Death from COVID-19 Will Soar



[/coronavirus/tip-of-the-iceberg-existing-racial-](#)

[/coronavirus/tip-of-the-iceberg-existing-racial-inequalities-in-death-from-covid-19-will-soar](#) [Florida Atlantic University](#) [/institutions/newsroom/1234/](#).

Lifesaving innovations for COVID-19 will only markedly increase the already existing racial inequalities, if public health initiatives for equitable dissemination throughout all communities are not immediately developed. The introduction of drugs for HIV, respiratory distress syndrome, and hepatitis C resulted in racial inequalities. Moreover, before the introduction of the Salk polio vaccine in 1952, initially, black Americans experienced significantly lower rates of paralytic polio than white Americans. By 1959, after the widespread distribution of the vaccine, the reverse was true.

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Center offers COVID-19 training and resources for individuals with autism spectrum disorder

[/coronavirus/center-offers-covid-19-training-and-resources-for-individuals-with-autism-spectrum-disorder2](#) [Indiana University](#) [/institutions/newsroom/2491/](#).

The HANDS in Autism® Interdisciplinary Training & Resource Center at IUPUI launched a Coronavirus Hub for educators, families, and medical professionals to assist them in helping individuals with autism spectrum disorder cope during the pandemic.

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