

KID CONNECTS WEEKLY NEWSLETTER: GIVING YOURSELF PERMISSION TO FEEL, GRIEF AND LOSS RELATED TO COVID-19 & SUMMER ACTIVITY IDEAS

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FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT:

Contact our warm line at, (303) 245-4418, to talk directly to an Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant.



Hello parents and caregivers! We hope that this newsletter finds you healthy and well. Kid Connects is a program with Mental Health Partners. We provide early childhood mental health consultation to childcare centers in Boulder and Broomfield counties. Early childhood mental health consultants work to support the social-emotional development of young children. One way we support the mental health of young children is by supporting the skills of their caregivers. We are here to offer support during the COVID-19 pandemic. To help keep you updated on practical strategies, tools, and tips we will offer a weekly e-newsletter. This week, our newsletter discusses how to navigate your own emotions when you are with your child, and strategies for supporting young children with grief and loss. We also include a list of fun summer activities to do despite COVID-19. If you have a question,

have a request for a newsletter topic, or wish to unsubscribe, please reach out to our warm line (303)245-4418 or email the Kid Connects' supervisor, Beth Garrett-Myers, at bgarrett@mhpcolorado.org

Giving Yourself Permission to Feel

The novel Coronavirus has no doubt brought a mix of emotions for children and parents alike. Balancing our own emotions along with our children's can be difficult. It is possible you feel exhausted from homeschooling and child rearing while working full time, worried about your family's health and safety, stressed by social distancing, and disappointed from cancelled events and plans. Although these are all normal and expected feelings, it is important that parent's model effective social and emotional skills for their children and communicate their emotions in an age appropriate manner. According to PhD Sara Waters, "Children pick up on our emotional state whether we acknowledge it or not, so when we say everything is fine even though it's not, it can be confusing for children and it tells them that we should avoid feeling our negative emotions"¹

It is expected that you are going to have hard days. Naming your emotions and discussing ways you cope with your emotions can be valuable to your child's social emotional development. Ideally, we all hope that we can calmly discuss our emotions in a developmentally appropriate way. And when we fall short of that ideal, which we will, we can always repair the relationship by acknowledging our feelings and how our behaviors impacted our child. We will shed a tear in front of our child or snap at him/her over the smallest thing. The good news is we can always repair by acknowledging our emotions and how that impacts the child. For example, "I was frustrated and yelled at you. I could see that scared you. I am sorry."

¹ Gray, D. (2020). Healthline, How parents can help themselves and their children with Covid-19 stress. Retrieved from: <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/covid19-stress-parents-help-themselves-children>

When we can clearly identify and label our emotions, we are showing children that it is appropriate to name your feelings and find ways to work through them. Naming our feelings can also give space to connect over a shared feeling with children, since children so often pick up and model our emotional states. For older children, a simple acknowledgement of “It looks like you are feeling tense, I am tense and stressed too” can go a long way. Showing them what you DO when you are stressed, can go even further in building healthy social and emotional resilience. “When I am feeling stressed, I take a few deep breaths in a quiet space or go for a walk when I can”.



When talking with your children about your own feelings regarding the virus, regulating your emotions and keeping in mind your children’s age and developmental capacity is key. Reassuring your children and talking to them when you are calm is important. For younger children, suggesting positive outlets like moving their body, drawing, or artwork can be a good outlet for stress and anxiety. Instead of glossing over your child’s stress, validate their feelings, and then focus on what your family is doing to stay healthy and safe, to provide comfort.

Grief and Loss Related to COVID-19

Loss is the loosing something or someone. Therefore, loss can be experienced in many forms including loss of finances, health, and dreams/opportunities, as well as death. With COVID 19 many of us are facing multiple forms of loss. The nature COVID 19 has restricted our time spent with loved ones, changed the plans we were looking forward to and may have cost us our financial security. Children are missing their friends. If they are not in care, they may be missing their teachers. If they are in care, they may have been asked to change classrooms. Additionally, COVID 19 is resulting in the loss of life. Like all of us, little children are trying to grapple with these big losses. Research shows that consistency and predictability are key in supporting your young children. We acknowledge this is an especially hard task given the unpredictable nature of COVID-19. This can compound the experience of loss for all involved. Below we provide some psychoeducation on children’s understanding of grief and loss and ways you as parents and caregivers can respond to support your young children.

Children’s experience of grief and loss: For young children, loss can feel like trying to understand a jigsaw puzzle. Each child will vary, experiencing a range in response and impact. Some of the changes you may see include irritability, aggression, impulsivity, sadness, separation anxiety, poor concentration, withdrawing, regression, and changes in eating, sleeping and toileting patterns. Support a child’s grief and loss process by listening, normalizing, and modeling healthy forms of grieving.



Strategies for helping children cope with loss:²

- Recognize and validate the loss. Do not minimize it or compare the loss to what others are experiencing.
- While it is an ongoing challenge, strive to provide consistency and routine. The brain thrives on predictable patterns. Brining rhythm to a child's day helps them (and us) know what to expect next and provides a sense of safety.
- Understand that all behavior is communication.
- Be patient, both with your child and yourself.
- We are missing loved ones, and young children are no different. Help them connect with others, including friends, virtually. You can help your child send a card or a picture to that loved one or put up pictures of them in your home.
- Create space to connect with your child and opportunities to engage in physical touch.
- Provide opportunities to express their grief through play, art, and other creative forms.
- In the case of death, memorialize the person who died. As spending time with family and friends is limited and that it's currently challenging to hold services to honor the loved one, you may need to get creative. Try providing virtual connection, create a shrine/ alter to honor the loved one, put up pictures, speak about the loved one so the child knows it's not taboo to talk about and remember the person.³ Here is a link to at home grief activities <https://www.judishouse.org/homebased-grief-activities>

Children's understanding of death: Young children lack a real understanding of death and often struggle to understand its permanence. Children under 2 may not understand death but have a sense of absence when a loved person is gone. Children 2-4 may ask the same questions over and over. Children 4-7 may think that death is reversible, draw inaccurate conclusions that they caused the death, and/ or ask more concrete



questions.⁴

How to talk about death: There are no perfect words. It is best to avoid euphemisms such as “went to sleep” or “went away” as this can lead to fears about sleep and separation in children. Instead, use simple, honest language. Explain the person cannot return and that their body no longer works. Provide explanations in small bits so as not to overwhelm a child. They will generally ask you for more information when they are ready. It is okay to say, “I do not know.”

For more information on how grief affects young children and how to communicating with them about death go to <https://www.judishouse.org/additional-resources>.⁵

² Child Mind Institute. (2020). Helping children cope with grief. <https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-grief/>

³ Judi's House JAG Institute For Grieving Children and Families. (2018). Helpful Information for Supporting Grieving Children and Families. <https://www.judishouse.org/additional-resources>

⁴ Child Mind Institute. (2020). Helping children cope with grief. <https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-grief/>

⁵ Judi's House JAG Institute For Grieving Children and Families. (2018). Helpful Information for Supporting Grieving Children and Families. <https://www.judishouse.org/additional-resources>

Missing Out

As discussed above, loss can be experienced in many different forms. With the numerous regulations and restrictions related to COVID-19, we are asked make sacrifices to ensure the safety of our families and community. Normally summer is a time of fun and joy. When we think of summer we think of BBQs, swimming, family vacations, weddings, camping etc... Our summer will be looking very different. Our summer activities are just a few of the ways that we have had to adjust our life. Many children are missing out on day-to-day activities such to going to the park, visiting friends and family, and going to school. We outlined below some strategies to help you support your child with loss of missing out on activities. Some of these strategies may sound repetitive, and we think they are so important they should be mentioned twice.

1. Provide an understanding or narrative to your child explain why they are not able to do something. “Remember COVID-19 is a germ that makes people sick. We need to keep our distance from people to keep us and them safe. The pool is closed to stop the spread of COVID-19.”
2. Be patient with yourself and your child. You both are having to make significant changes that are challenging.
3. Recognize and validate the loss. “I know you really want to go swimming. We swam every Saturday before COVID-19. I can see it really makes you mad!”
4. Change a no into a yes. This is not always possible but when you are able, offer your child an alternative. “We can’t go swimming, but we can run through the sprinklers!”
5. Compile a list of fun activities. When your child is experiencing disappointment about not being able to do something, have him/her chose something from that list. You can refer to the list we made below.



Ideas for Summer Activities while still Following Social Distancing Guidelines

- 1) “Kids make the rules” day (within reason) ⁶
 - a. Or similarly, ABC day, choose a letter and plan the day around that letter. (ex. for the letter R you may eat raisins and red apples, play ring around the rosie or have a race and make an art project out of ribbon)
- 2) Themed movie marathon
- 3) Order curbside takeout from one of your family’s favorite restaurants (you can also make this into an indoor or outdoor picnic)
- 4) Host a “campout” either inside your home or in your yard
- 5) Bake a special treat together (ex. make ice cream in a bag)
- 6) Make your own play dough
- 7) Play charades⁷



⁶ Children’s Health. 2020. 4 tips for coping with disappointment during COVID-19. Retrieved from <<https://www.childrens.com/health-wellness/4-tips-for-coping-with-disappointment-during-covid-19>>

⁷ Mountain Meadow Ranch Summer Camp. 2020. Retrieved from <<https://www.mountainmeadow.com/125-things-to-do-during-quarantine/>>

- 8) Listen to a podcast (ex. Listen to But why: A podcast for curious kids, Stuff you should know, or KidNuz)
- 9) Set up indoor hopscotch/obstacle course with painters' tape
- 10) Take a scenic drive
- 11) Set up a treasure hunt (hide anywhere from 10 to 20 items around the house or outside, optionally, you can include clues)
- 12) Read at home Bingo, as your kids accomplish each reading task, they can cross off the corresponding bingo square
- 13) Make a cardboard fort
- 14) Go on a "vacation" at home
 - a. Choose a place to "visit" such as Paris. Try using online tours to see famous sites, eat French themed foods, learn about famous people like Edith Piaf, and do a craft activity such as making a model of the Eiffel Tower.
- 15) If you are celebrating any events, decorate the house with signs, balloons and still dress up for the event and take pictures (ex. a graduation, birthday, etc.)
- 16) Create themed activities around a book (ex. Read Alice in Wonderland and have a Mad Hatters Tea, read Where The Wild Things Are and create your own Wild Things paper bag masks, read Blueberries For Sal and make Blueberry Muffins).
- 17) Plant a fairy tale or story book garden (ex. Plant a Cinderella pumpkin, Jack's beans, the Princess's peas, snap Dragons, Peter Rabbit's carrots and cabbage.)

Despite cancellations and changes of your usual summer plans, there are still many ways to have fun and make meaningful memories with your family!



1 Children's Health. 2020. 4 tips for coping with disappointment during COVID-19. Retrieved from <<https://www.childrens.com/health-wellness/4-tips-for-coping-with-disappointment-during-covid-19>>

2 Mountain Meadow Ranch Summer Camp. 2020. Retrieved from <<https://www.mountainmeadow.com/125-things-to-do-during-quarantine/>>