

## Supporting Children Experiencing the Loss of a Loved One from a Distance

We are deeply saddened with you about the fact that your children are unable to visit their loved one in the hospital. We've created this guide to help you navigate this difficult time.

### **Communicating to children why visitor restrictions are in place**

*Why can't we visit Dad in the hospital?*

#### For ages 6 and older

Coronavirus, or COVID-19, is a virus that affects the respiratory system (lungs, nose, mouth, throat, and all other body parts involved in breathing). It is passed from person to person in ways we cannot see – through tiny droplets from sneezes, coughs, and saliva. That means that if one person coughs into their hand and touches a door handle, the next person to touch that door handle will have the virus germs on their hand. These germs can make people sick.

All of the adults at school, the doctors and nurses in the hospital, and the leaders in charge of our country want all families to be safe and healthy. They are asking that we stay home and avoid being around other people (like in classrooms and hospitals). We are staying home to slow the virus's spreading.

Doctors and scientists are working very hard to stop the virus. Right now we don't know how long it will take, but we do know that the virus is contagious (it can move from one person to another very easily), that some people can get more sick than others, and that we can do our part to help prevent the virus from spreading by staying home as much as possible. Even though it is so sad to be away from Dad in the hospital, we need to stay home to help stop the spread of the virus. This will give the doctors enough time to help people who are getting sick. The hospital is full of people who need the doctor's help right now and by staying home, we are making sure more people don't get sick.

#### For ages 5 and under

Young children will not be able to tolerate an in-depth conversation. A brief and literal explanation can help young children feel heard and safe. For example:

"We are sad that we will not be able to visit Dad in the hospital. The hospital is very busy taking care of people who have the Coronavirus. Our family has to stay home right now so we don't get sick and so that other people won't get sick from the Coronavirus. We will think of other ways we can feel close to Dad."

### **How to support children emotionally when they learn they can't visit their loved one**

- Acknowledge and validate the difficulty of the situation and how hard it is to not see Dad (and how hard it is for you too).
- Allow all possible feelings to emerge in response, which might include frustration, sadness, anger, fear, numbness or shock. Avoid minimizing or disallowing any emotion. Rather, allow your child's emotion to

be expressed in his or her own way (e.g., crying, yelling, wanting to be held, wanting to go back to playing, etc.)

- Tell your child what emotion you are sensing from them, ask if it's accurate, and validate that their emotion is reasonable given the circumstance. Let your child know that you are there to go through it together. For example, "It seems like you are feeling frustrated because we can't visit Dad. Is that right? I understand, and I'm really frustrated about it too. We can be upset together."
- Have individual time with each child to talk about what's happening or just be together.
- Also have some family time (e.g. meals, group activity, or group conversation) so kids feel that you are all in it together.
- Try to maintain as much routine as you can for children such as at meal-times and bed-times, and maintain your household rules for safety, cleanliness, etc. This is emotionally stabilizing for them.
- Give your children lots of physical affection and words of affection to ground them in love.
- Answer your child's questions as best you can in an honest, simple, developmentally appropriate way. Let them know that they can ask you anything.
- Think of other ways your child can be connected with her loved one (see below).

### **Anticipating the death of a loved one from a distance- what you can do to stay connected**

- Make use of available technology to keep in touch with your loved one in the hospital by phone call, text message, video chat (FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Whatsapp). Use messaging apps like Marco Polo to leave video messages for loved ones.
- Help children process the difficult news and say "goodbye" through memory making activities:
  - Collect family photos
  - Make an online collective photo album involving extended family and friends
  - Share favorite memories together
  - Write letters and notes
  - Draw pictures
- If you, as a parent, are able to visit your loved one, children can give you pictures to decorate the wall of the room or letters to be read to the patient (or put under the patient's pillow). It can still be meaningful to do this even if your loved one is no longer able to see pictures or respond to letters.
- If the patient is conscious and coherent, help them create a legacy memento to pass on to their children:
  - Record a video or audio message sharing favorite memories and what the patient loves about each child
  - Write a letter or notes, or dictate letters to someone else to record
  - Record the patient reading a favorite children's book aloud
- Make special time to say goodbye as a family and honor your loved one at home
  - Make the patient's favorite meal and eat it together
  - Watch the patient's favorite movie as a family
  - Engage in important family traditions or create a new tradition or ritual in the patient's memory
  - Mark the time of death by lighting a candle, saying a prayer, or having a moment of silence as a family

- Hold a ceremony where each family member can voice their goodbye and message of love following time of death
- Give your children a picture or special item belonging to their loved one who has died. This can serve as a physical symbol and reminder of the love they shared.

**Online Resources for supporting grieving children:**

- [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org) and [www.kidsgrief.ca](http://www.kidsgrief.ca)