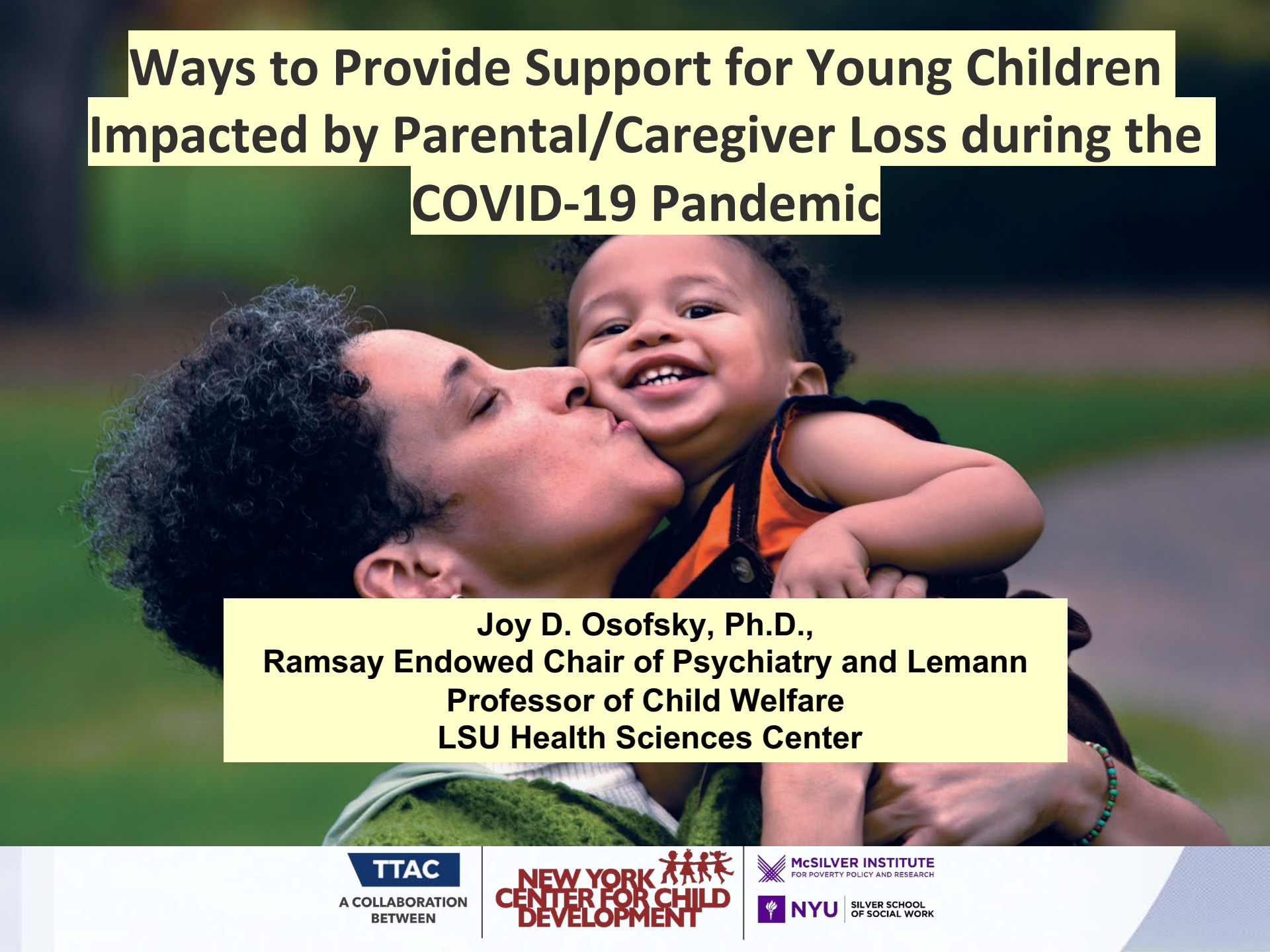


Ways to Provide Support for Young Children Impacted by Parental/Caregiver Loss during the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Who We Are

The New York City Early Childhood Mental Health Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC), is funded through ThriveNYC, in partnership with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)

TTAC is a partnership between the New York Center for Child Development (NYCCD) and the McSilver Institute on Poverty Policy and Research

- **New York Center for Child Development** has been a major provider of early childhood mental health services in New York with expertise in informing policy and supporting the field of Early Childhood Mental Health through training and direct practice
- **NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research** houses the Community and the Managed Care Technical Assistance Centers (CTAC/MCTAC), which offer clinic, business, and system transformation supports statewide to all behavioral healthcare providers

TTAC is tasked with building the capacity and competencies of mental health and early childhood professionals through ongoing training and technical assistance

<http://www.TTACny.org>




Visit our Website

TTACNY.org

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NYC Early Childhood Mental Health TTAC Training and Technical Assistance Center

TTAC is funded by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene through [ThriveNYC](#).

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Events

Thursday, April 2, 2020

TTAC Webinar: Supporting Families and Caregivers of Infants and Young Children Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Wednesday, May 20, 2020

Beginning at the Beginning: The Foundational Elements of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation – Part I

Friday, May 29, 2020

Beginning at the Beginning: The Foundational Elements of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation – Part II

Thursday, June 4, 2020

Beginning at the Beginning: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation in Infant & Toddler Care - Part III

Wednesday, June 10, 2020

TTAC Webinar: The Loss and Grief of COVID-19: Real Challenges and Practical Suggestions

Friday, June 12, 2020

TTAC Webinar: Reducing Bias during COVID-19 using the Crawford Bias Reduction Theory & Training

[view more >](#)



NYC DOHMH Bureau of Early Intervention E-Learning Modules



Foundations of Social-Emotional Development in Infants and Toddlers
[Learn More](#)

NYC Early Childhood Mental Health Network COVID-19 Resource Guidance



Self-care resources for child serving professionals and resources to inform your work with children and families.
[Learn More](#)

The Early Childhood Mental Health Network



Get to know the Early Childhood Therapeutic Centers (ECTCs)! Available in both English and Spanish.
[Learn More](#)

Presentation Roadmap

Coronavirus and Young Children

1

- Review the impact on young children of the many losses of parents and caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic

2

- Address the unique stressors that young children and families face with grief and loss and ways to provide support

3

- Examine the ways in which young children respond to loss to deepen understanding of the grieving process and to offer ways to respond with supportive relationships.

4

- Consider individual differences and cultural diversity in the grieving process – and remind adults of the importance of self care at this time.

Children Impacted by COVID-19 Deaths

- Research has indicated that for every 13 COVID-19 deaths, one child under the age of 18 has lost a parent.
- Research has estimated that about 40,000 children in the United States have lost a parent to COVID-19 since February 2020 -- one quarter of those children are younger than 10 years.

JAMA Pediatrics, April 5, 2021

The Extent of Grief and Loss

- Research shows that each COVID-19 death leaves 0.078 children aged 0 to 17 parentally bereaved.
- This represents a 17.5% to 20.2% increase in parental bereavement without COVID-19.
- Although the bereavement multiplier is small, it translates into large numbers of children who have lost a parent. As of February 2021, 37,300 children aged 0 to 17 years had lost at least 1 parent due to COVID-19.

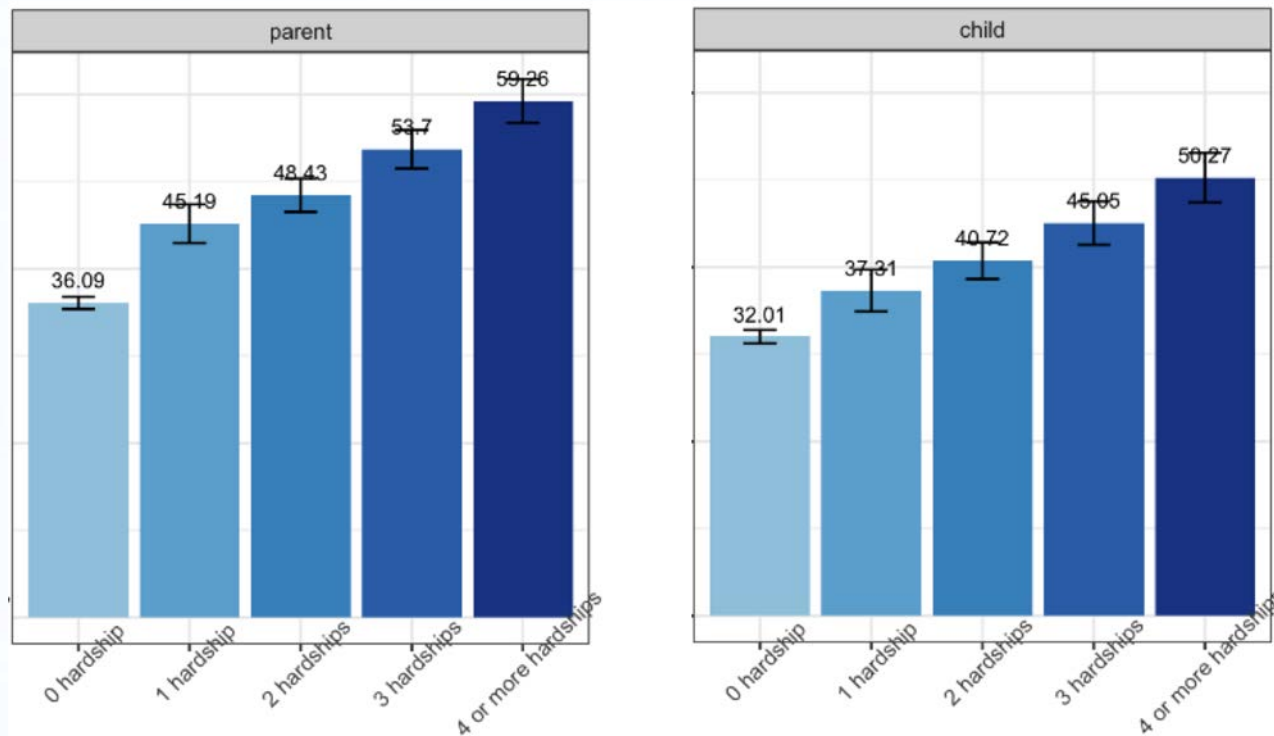
Inequities of COVID-19

- While Black Americans represent 13.4% of the overall population, they represent 20% of the parentally bereaved children identified in the study—in a more equitable and fairer world, this outcome would not be happening

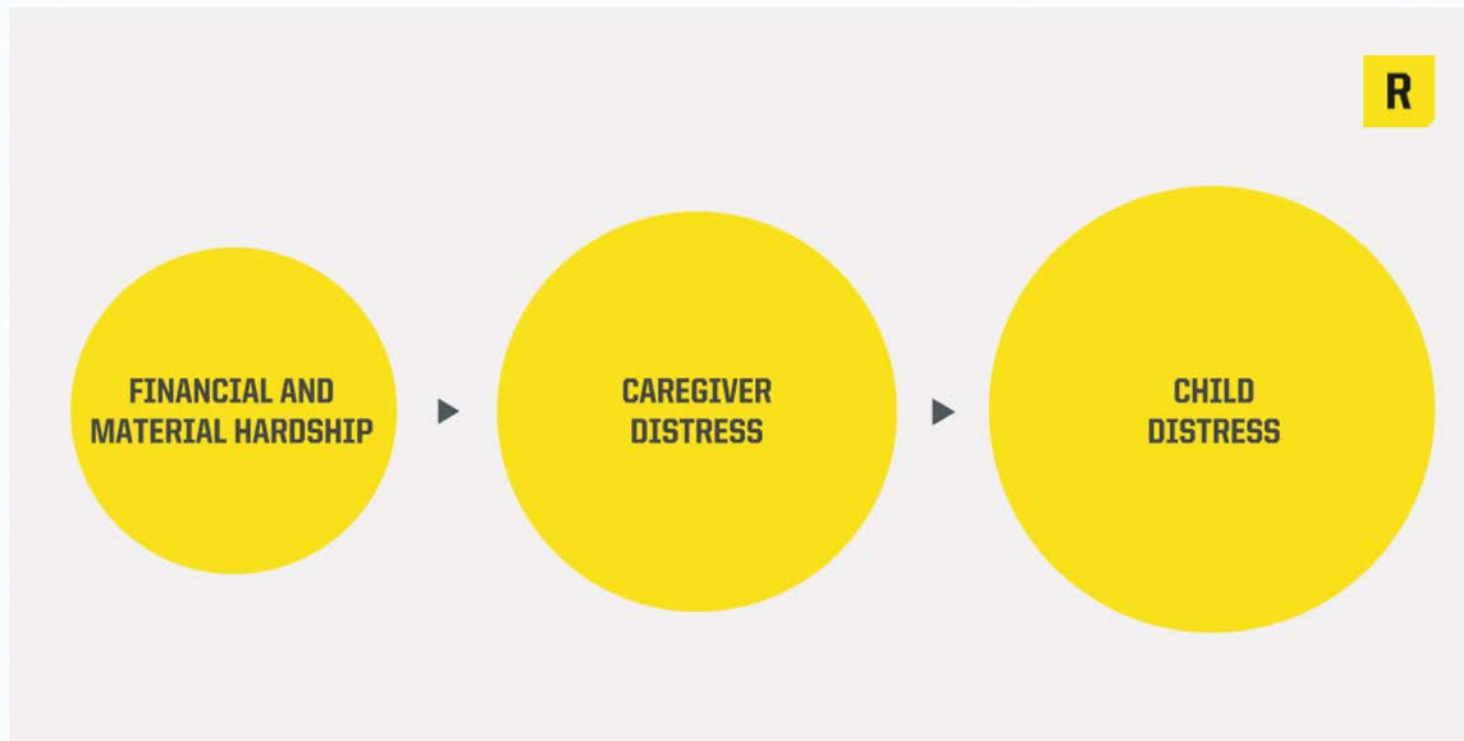
Many Children are Impacted by Parental/Caregiver Death from COVID-19

- The scale of COVID-19 mortality in the United States merits efforts to continuously track how many children are affected by parental death.
- Sudden parental death, such as that occurring with COVID-19, can be particularly traumatizing for children and leave families ill prepared to navigate its consequences.
- Moreover, COVID-19 losses are occurring at a time of social isolation, institutional strain, and economic hardship, potentially leaving bereaved children without the supports they need.

The level of emotional distress in households, for both parents and children, is tied to the number of material hardships encountered



...Leading to a Chain Reaction of Hardship



Chronic Stress and Lack of Parental Buffering Leads to Toxic Stress

Positive Stress



Short, stressful events like meeting new people or starting the first day of school are healthy for brain development. They prepare the brain and body for stressful situations later in life.

Tolerable Stress



Tragic, unavoidable events like a natural disaster or losing a loved one aren't good for us. But if supportive caregivers are around to buffer the stress response, these events won't do lasting damage to the brain and body.

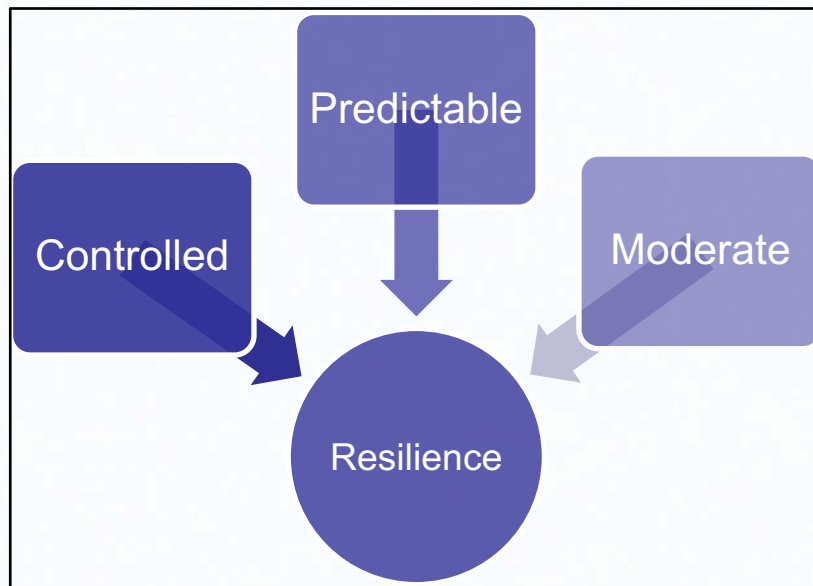
Toxic Stress



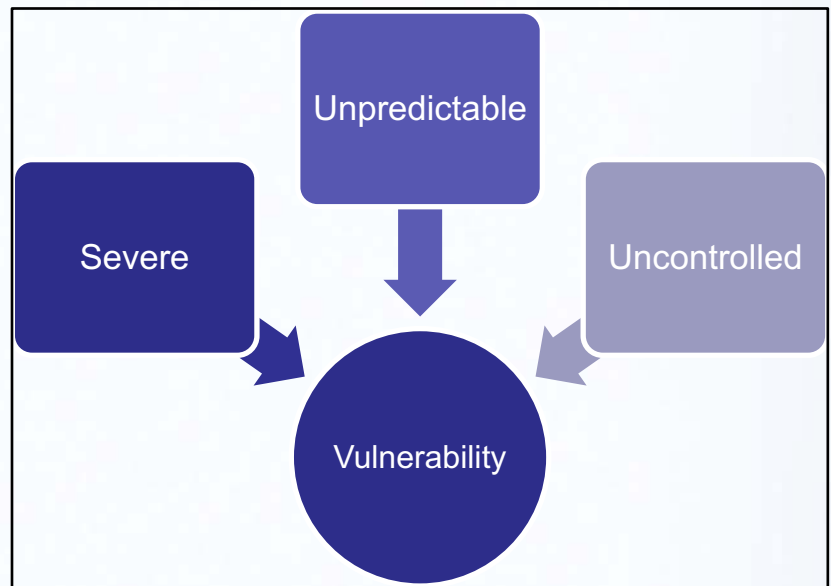
Ongoing, repeated exposure to abuse or neglect is bad for brain development. If no supportive adults are present to help buffer the stress response, stress hormones will damage developing structures in the child's brain. The result is an increased vulnerability to lifelong physical and mental health problems, including addiction.

Outcomes of Toxic Stress

Positive/Tolerable Stress



Toxic Stress



What are the risks for children with such losses?

- Children who lose a parent are at elevated risk of:
 - traumatic grief
 - depression
 - poor educational outcomes
 - unintentional death or suicide
 - without needed supports and interventions, the consequences can persist into adulthood

Developmental Considerations for Young Children with Grief and Loss

Concept of Death

Ages 2-4 years

- Egocentric – no cognitive understanding
- Loss seen as abandonment – reversible, not permanent
- Preconceptual – unable to understand concepts

Ages 4-7 years

- Gaining sense of autonomy
- Seeing self as initiator
- Magical thinking, guilt

- Grief Response/Signs of Distress
- Death seen as reversible; Intense brief response
- Most aware of changes in routine and altered patterns of care
- Regression in eating, sleeping, clingy, separation anxiety, more crying
- Dysregulated behaviors and emotions
- Death still seen as reversible
- Repetitive questioning
- Feeling of responsibility from wishes & thoughts
- Regression in eating, sleeping (nightmares)

What can Help at this Difficult Time

- The things that are important to help a child recover from grief:
 - Active engagement in school
 - Spending time with friends
 - Face to face encounters with extended family, teachers, counselors – which has been impossible during the lockdown except virtually if available to the child
- With more hope now with spread of the vaccine, it is important to put as much of this support in place as soon as it can be done safely especially for children experiencing loss
- Consideration of mental health support services embedded in child-care, preschools, and schools should be considered at this time

What can Help Children Move Forward?

- No amount of intervention will make things all better for children without significant day-to-day support being put in place
- For that support to be more effective, there also needs to be recognition that the adults who are affected and caring for the children may also need support.
- Care and counseling can at least ease some of the suffering and help support the young child

Sesame Street COVID Survey

(611 Pairs of Parents and Children from 43 states collected mid-May-early June 2020)

- The Kids are All Right.... But Why?
- Children and their Parents in the Age of COVID



- Courtney Wong Chin, M.A. | Courtney.Chin@sesame.org Director, Content Research & Evaluation, Sesame Workshop Presented at SRCDD April 2021- First Wave of data

Findings from survey in June 2020: Some children are demonstrating resilience

- What's important:
 - Continued connection in-person with family, particularly with close parent or caregiver
 - Parents represent hope, heroism to fight virus, care and wisdom in children's lives

Childrens' Responses to COVID-19

- Survey study of parents after July 2020
 - Family routines are important
 - Maintaining a predictable home environment
 - Researchers found fewer mental health symptoms (anxiety, externalizing issues) in preschoolers (4-5 year olds)

- Glynn, et al (2021) A predictable home environment may protect child mental health during COVID-19. *Neurobiology of Stress*, 14, 100291)

Children benefit from Support from Parents or Caregivers

- The Sesame Street data indicated that although COVID had impacted children's lives, for many children, it had not totally overwhelmed them
- How do children get the security to continue being “regular kids” during a global pandemic? -- Parents or Caregivers represent hope, caring, wisdom in children's lives – someone they can turn to and depend on to help keep them safe and give them hope

What Parents and Other Adults can do to Help Children

- Help them recognize what they can do
- “Choosing” what they can do and control to stay safe
- Encourage emotional awareness - as opposed to pushing emotions away or hiding them

Addressing Grief

- Even very young children feel connected to the person who died, especially if that person is a parent, caregiver, grandparent
- Example: “I know it can be confusing and upsetting because we couldn’t be there to say goodbye” What kinds of questions or worries do you have? I’d like to hear how you’re feeling” (Depending on the child’s age, the child may not only feel sad but also they may feel guilty that something they did or thought caused the death)

Ways to the Help Child Feel Connected to the Person who Died

- By looking at photos or videos of being together
- By memorializing the person by planting flowers in their honor, lighting a candle (depending on culture and tradition), doing something the person really enjoyed – maybe something you did together
- Talk about positive memories, encourage child to share stories – with play or language

Difficult Experiences of Loss and Death with COVID-19

- With a more predictable death, there are opportunities to say goodbye and some planning can be done.
- The deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic are often traumatic without family nearby
- Frequently they are not expected and there are no “normal” ways to say good-bye
- Grief/Loss and complicated bereavement with COVID-19
- It is easy to see how children can be overlooked.
- Even in ordinary times, children are often left out of discussions and events surrounding death.

Caregiver Common Concerns

- What is normal grief for a young child
- Should the child attend the funeral (or visit the grave?)
- How much should I tell the child? What if they ask for details?
- What if the child witnessed the illness and caregiver going to the hospital? (example of young child playing out the ambulance leaving over & over)

Common myths about infant/toddler grief

- Crying or displays of grief in front of the child will make it harder for them
- Talking to the child about the death will remind the child of the death and the loved one
- Infants are unaffected by loss

Helpful Interventions

Ages 2-4 years

- New routines
- Frequent, short interactions
- Comforting, touching
- Emotional availability to listen and just be there
- Consistency and stability

• Ages 4-7 years

- Symbolic play – children will often play out their understanding of what happened, violent, role reversal
- Drawing and telling stories can be helpful (example of twins' play)
- Allow/encourage expression of feelings, including anger
- Listen and be available to talk about what happened

How Caregivers and Others can Help Children

- Express the emotions that you have, how you also miss the person as well as the activities that you did together.
- When a loved one has died, ask the child what they liked to do with the person and what they may want to tell the person. They might want to draw a picture.
- Don't be afraid to open the conversation. Ask the child what they know or what they have heard and correct any misconceptions

Children of Different Ages Understand and Handle Death Differently

- Young children may need different supports
 - Toddlers and preschoolers do not understand that death is permanent
 - They don't yet understand that everyone eventually dies
 - They may wait at the door, continually ask about the return of the person which can be upsetting to other parent or caregivers
 - Young children may be clingy and fussy, not understanding and missing the familiar caregiver
 - Regressive behaviors are common in toileting, sleeping, and even language

When do young children understand that death is permanent?

- Young children have trouble understanding death and may believe the death is reversible.
- Provide opportunities to express thoughts and feelings about death through play activities and drawing or an activity they choose to remember the person
- Be prepared to be asked questions repeatedly and to answer them over and over

What may Interfere with Supporting Children Related to Grief and Loss

- Adults around them are preoccupied with their own grief and overwhelmed with not being able to say good-bye in person
- They may not think about their child's developmental needs
- Even in ordinary times, children are often left out of discussions and events surrounding death as the adults are preoccupied with their own grief and overwhelmed by preparations and planning
- Also, children may be easily distracted by play so adults may think they are indifferent
- When a child loses a loving, supportive person, there may be no one familiar to help them deal with the pain and sadness of the loss

Why should Caregivers Talk to Young Children about Death

- Many adults worry that talking about the death will make matters worse
- More often than not, a clear direct explanation, based in reality, using language that children can understand with emotional support is more apt to bring relief than is leaving children to create their own explanations
- Particularly during the preschool-years, children have vivid imaginations and weave fantasies and tales that can be more frightening than reality.

What to Say to young Children about Death

- There is no fixed script about what to say to young children about death
- Parents know their children best, therefore talking to a young children about death will be informed and tailored by the unique relationship each parent and family has with her/his child, family style and cultural and family traditions
- It is suggested the explanation should include three essential components:
 - that the deceased person cannot be with the child anymore
 - that the deceased person did not want to leave the child
 - that the person will never return

Ways to be Helpful and Supportive

- Provide affection and security. Reassure the child of love, that we will miss the person who died, and that we will all get through this together.
- Look for ways to help the child express emotions both verbally and nonverbally, for example, through art and play.
- Be alert for the child's causal connection of something they thought or did contributed to the death (Ex: being angry at someone)
- Reassure that nothing you said or did caused the death

What Can Caregivers and Children Do Together?

- Help a child draw a picture of the person or thing they have lost.
- After a child has suffered a loss, ask the child to tell you about the person, what they liked and ask about a time the child spent with the person, or something they did together. Retell good memories!
- Later on, look at a photo album of pictures of the person the child is missing, and if there are picture of that person with the child, ask the child if they can remember where the picture was taken and what they were doing together.
- Let the child, who cannot yet write, dictate a story about the person so they can keep it in their home or near their bed.
- Just listen to the child.
- Read a book or a story
- Give a hug

Additional Worries for Children, Parents and Other Caregivers

- With a death during the COVID-19 pandemic, children may worry about what may happen to them or their surviving loved ones and others in the community (example of young child who lost grandparent to COVID and did not want to go to school)
- Caregivers should continue to provide reassurance whenever possible about the precautions that are being taken to keep them and their loved ones safe.
- After a death, it is important to plan new routines just as when schools open it's important to have new routines

Protective Factors

- The most important protective factor is a committed available adult capable of sensitive, responsive, reliable caregiving and emotional support
- Developmentally appropriate involvement in cultural and family traditions and rituals are important
- Providing clear, direct developmentally appropriate explanations including allowing openness about feelings

Culture Organizes Development and Even How we Experience and Express Grief

To Help Children and Families, it is important to learn about the cultural traditions of the family

- Affect
- Dress and customs
- Language and gestures
- Interpersonal relationships/behaviors
- Art, music, movement and dance
- Diet and food choices
- Historical context - “Legacy”; historical and personal “myths”
- Religious beliefs, values and world views - including belief in God, evil, afterlife, notions of equality, personal choice, freedom.
- Death and grieving

Effect of Grief and Loss on Children, even Young Children

- “Grief does not completely end but will become a part of who that person is, sometimes intense and sometimes existing as a type of “background noise” in their lives. The grief remains, but the intensity is manageable”
- (Katherine Gilbert, Ph.D.)

“Red Flags”

When more help may be needed

- For young children:
 - Behavioral regressions for a period of time – more than a few weeks
 - Significant changes in behavior
 - More temper tantrums
 - Extreme aggression
 - Extreme and persistent separation anxiety
 - Extreme fear or withdrawal

The “Six S’s

(Julie Kaplow, Ph.D.Trauma and Grief Center, Hackett Center for Mental Health)

- Safety and security
- Simple language
- Supervision
- Structure
- Social support
- Self-care

Self-Care for Caregivers is Crucial

- Caregiver well-being is the most important factor in supporting children through the death of a loved one
- Parents and caregivers need support and should be encouraged to seek support for themselves as needed
- Remember, with COVID-19, that virtual support with telephone or via media is better than no support!

How to Help a Child be Resilient after Loss

- Take good care of yourself as caregiver (to reduce risks of your own reactions to the loss and to prevent depression)
- Work to strengthen family bonds – Special family time with child or children each week
- Listen to your child – Active listening helps child become aware of feelings
- Have consistent structure
- Support a warm family environment with open communication and clear family rules
- Plan ahead for times that are likely to be stressful – holidays, birthdays, special transition times, ie. – starting preschool and school

“The most important thing is for children to feel safe and loved and supported” (Fred Rogers)

