



Portland Institute
For Loss and Transition

Principle of Practice

Involve Children and Teens in Decision Making when a Family Member is Dying

In this time of the COVID-19 global health crisis and physical distancing requirements, families might face the heartbreaking inability to be with the person who is dying. You can acknowledge how painful and unfair that feels and work to create rituals in your own home that help children and teens feel connected while also saying or doing what feels right for them before the person dies, even from afar.

Just like adults, children and teens benefit from feeling included and given the opportunity to be involved in decisions related to communications, rituals, and practices when a family member is dying. Share with children and teens that it is likely the person will die and ask if they would like to do or say something now that they have that information. Some children and teens may want to verbally share their thoughts or feelings with the person who is dying, while others may choose to make a card or drawing, write a letter, or leave a treasured item, such as a stuffed animal or favorite blanket, with the person. If the person who is dying is unable to have visitors, or the child or teen has chosen to not visit in the hospital or care facility, there are still other ways for them to communicate with the person who is dying. If a family member, social worker, or medical professional can be at the bedside of the person, they can read the child's or teen's letter, share their picture, or facilitate a phone or video call. If children and teens aren't sure what to say, write, or draw, here are some prompts that might help them get started:

- I love you...
- I will miss you...
- I'm glad you've been my...
- I will not forget...

- One thing I've learned from you is...
- I'm really sad that you are dying.
- Thank you for...
- I wish...
- A favorite memory I have is...

Children and teens can also sing songs or tell stories to the person who is dying. Remind them that even though their person might not be able to respond, they can likely hear them, and their messages matter. If time allows, family members can record a compilation of favorite music and family stories that can be played for their person in the hospital.

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Adapted from The Dougy Center Tipsheet, Supporting Children & Teens When a Family Member is Dying in a Hospital or Care Facility. For the full downloadable Tipsheet:

https://www.dougy.org/docs/SUPPORTING_Children_and_Teens_When_Someone_is_Dying.pdf