

# New resources on talking to children about illness and death during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The news that children currently face may seem almost unspeakable. But, together, we must find words, and ways, to give voice to their

experience and prevent millions of children struggling with their fears and uncertainty alone.

Research shows that sensitive and effective communication about life threatening illness has major benefits for [children](#) and their family's long-term psychological wellbeing.

A new comment authored by experts at the University of Oxford is published today in *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, highlighting the importance of communicating with children when a loved one had died from COVID-19.

- Families are separated from sick relatives who are being treated in hospital. When the patient dies, children within the family are often invisible to [hospital staff](#) liaising with relatives
- Parents want to protect their children from distress and may feel unsure about how and what to tell children about their relative's death
- Children are astute observers of their environment, and when communication is absent, they attempt to make sense of the situation on their own, with important long term consequences for their psychological wellbeing

Professor Alan Stein, Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford, said, 'In the midst of this devastating death toll and hospitalisations from COVID-19, [healthcare workers](#) are tasked with making life-changing telephone calls to relatives to tell them that a patient has died. It is crucial that a patient's role as a parent or grandparent is identified so that appropriate support can be offered to the [family](#) to tell the children of their loved-one's death.'

The comment highlights a platform of freely-available resources to support professionals and families communicate with relatives and

children when a patient is seriously ill or has died. The resources include:

- A step-by-step guide for staff making telephone calls to relatives when a patient has died.
- Prompts for staff to specifically inquire if the patient had important relationships with children
- A rationale for relatives about the importance of talking to children about what has happened
- A dedicated step-by-step guide for families to help plan how they will share this life-changing news with children, including specific phrases they might use
- Two animations to support the guides for staff and families

Prioritising effective communication with children about a parent or grandparent's illness and death during COVID-19 is essential to protect the intermediate and long-term psychological wellbeing of children.

To access the free resources, visit the [COVID-19 communication support website](#).

Provided by University of Oxford

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