

How to Help Children Who Miss Their Friends Amid COVID-19

As parents, many of us are coping with the loss of something within our daily lives because of COVID-19, whether it is the loss of a vacation, watching the opening baseball game of the season, or the loss of a job.

Children and adolescents are also coping with various losses within their lives. With the transition to distance learning, many children and adolescents are now coping with the loss of typical school days, celebrating important milestones and achievements like graduation ceremonies, as well as daily social interactions with friends and peers.

One common way children and adolescents cope with changes or challenges within their lives is through social supports from friends and peers. Much of this typically happens seamlessly and without planning, through regular interactions on the playground, between classes in the halls, out on the soccer field, or even during classes through short interchanges with their desk mate. However, in the current climate, children and adolescents are more isolated from one another and may be missing close physical and emotional connection to others their age. Here are a few ways that you can help your children who miss their friends amid the COVID-19 pandemic:

Ask open ended questions about your child's friendships,

such as why they miss their friends, what do they miss about their friends, and what makes a good friend. This will help them reflect on what they're feeling. Acknowledge their feelings by saying something like, "I hear that you really miss your friends." Also let them know how you feel, too. You won't be putting any thoughts into their head. Most likely they've already been thinking or feeling this way and you've just made it OK for them to express their grief. Many children and adolescents may be grieving the loss of that connectedness to others. Holding in intense emotions can lead to further issues, such as behavioral outbursts, low mood and withdrawal from others. So, by helping them express their emotions and not trying to "fix it" for them, you are helping them to cope with the pain or grief that they are feeling.

Encourage them to share how they're feeling with their friends.

People tend to withhold and/or further isolate themselves when they are experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression, particularly during times when they need social support the most. By encouraging your child to express their feelings to their friends, you are also helping other children and adolescents in need of social connection. At the same time, expressing emotions to friends help your child to develop



prosocial skills. Prosocial skills are social behaviors that help promote empathy and kindness toward others and they are essential to social-emotional development. Prosocial behaviors have been associated with positive self-concept, positive peer relationships, increased peer acceptance and decreased behavioral issues. You might suggest that their friends likely feel the same and might welcome the chance to talk. Suggest they start by saying something like, “I wonder if you’re feeling that it’s really sad to miss graduation; I’m feeling that way!”

Help them establish new ways to continue social interactions.

Set up weekly play dates or game nights through video conferencing apps. Don’t wait to do family and friend get-togethers until after COVID-19 passes. Continue regular family and school-based celebrations, such as birthday parties or silly hair day, through virtual means. Encourage your child to write letters or mail art to their friends. Typical social interactions for older children and adolescents are not often manufactured or mediated by parents; however, during this time, you may need to take a more active and encouraging role to guide your child to find new ways to interact with their friends. Understand that many children are still interacting socially with friends while engaged in online gaming. Talk to them about online safety and your rules about limits to online usage to help set your child’s expectations.

We are all finding creative ways to physically distance ourselves without socially distancing and to manage all of the difficult emotions this time brings. You can help your children navigate these difficult times and they may surprise you with some creative ideas themselves.

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