



Grieving the Loss of Summer 2020

Concepts Adults Must Understand before Talking with Campers

It's not all about COVID-19.

Although the pandemic has dominated the news and our lives, plenty of kids are coping with stressors far greater than other people's getting coronavirus. Don't assume that a young person's social-emotional distress has anything to do with COVID-19. If a child is upset, try: "I can see you're upset. What's bothering you?"

It's hard to talk about silver linings.

For some young people (and adults, of course), there have been positive aspects to spending more time at home, more time with family, and more time alone. Try asking an open-ended and two-pronged question, such as, "What have been the best and worst things about the past few months?" to allow for positives.

Be direct and avoid euphemisms.

When children are coping with death, euphemisms such as "went to sleep" can be confusing. Little kids might take what you say literally and start to fear bedtime; older kids might feel like you are too uncomfortable to have an honest conversation. Be direct instead. It's OK to say, "There won't be on-site camp this summer."

Expect wide-ranging emotions and behaviors.

Grief does not follow a predictable course, nor does it feel or look the same in everyone. It can come and go in waves. And just because kids look OK does not mean they feel OK inside. Check in periodically without obsessing. Remember that it's healthy for a grieving person to laugh, have fun, and participate in activities.

Probe and process the memories.

The young people you care for miss different things about camp, so it will feel supportive to ask, "What will/do you miss the most about camp?" Resist the urge to suggest the important memories. And remember that not all kids prefer to express their grief verbally; many want to draw, journal, or talk with peers instead of you.

Cancellation is not death.

There are two important points here: (1) All but the youngest children understand that death is final, but everyone knows that something that is cancelled could—in theory—be reinstated. Expect kids to argue, reason, and want to discuss how camp could be un-cancelled. That's a normal, healthy way to come to terms with the finality of a decision. And (2) remember that as much as we are all grieving cancellations, camp is ultimately a "nice-to-have," not a "need-to-have." At some point, gently share some perspective about how cancellation is an unselfish way to keep other people healthy. Offer hopeful messages about summer 2021.