



Resources for Grieving Children

Helping Children Cope With Grief

Whether the loss is a grandparent, a parent, a classmate or even a beloved family pet, the grieving process can be difficult and every child will grieve in their own way. Parents, caregivers and educators wondering how they can help will find many answers to their questions in the following guide, which has been assembled with advice from several experts in the area of child and adolescent grief. You will find tips broken down into a range of ages and experiences, and information about what to say, who should say it, what to look out for and how to help.

After a Loss

We all cope with death and grief differently. If you have several children, you may find that they express how they are feeling in surprisingly divergent ways. This can come down to personality as well as developmental age.

It is a fact that children grieve differently from adults. Young children may not even understand what death means, or that people who have died won't be coming back. They may worry they have done something to cause the death. On the other hand, they might not seem too concerned about it, or even go from crying one moment to wanting to play the next. It is also normal for a child to feel angry at the person who has died (or someone else entirely). As children get older they may begin to understand more, but will still need help from their parents and other caregivers on how to process and cope with loss.

Knowing what to say and how to support children during this time isn't easy. It is likely that you, too, are grieving and trying to deal with your own emotions. While you can't protect children from loss and the pain it may cause, you can play a major role in helping them feel secure and cope in the healthiest way possible.

Who Should Tell the Child?

If at all possible the person delivering the sad news should be the person closest to the child, even if that person is a parent who is also grieving. It is okay if the person sharing the news is sad or crying, but she shouldn't be so overwhelmed that she doesn't have

control over her emotions, which would alarm the child even more in an already scary and difficult situation. If the grieving parent is too upset to deliver the news somewhat calmly then it should be the next closest person to the child who breaks the news.

What to Say and How to Say It

There's no perfect time to share the news so children should be told as soon as possible, within reason. Wait until the end of the school day if that's only a few hours. The main consideration is that you don't want your child hearing the news unexpectedly from some other source or walking into a situation where there are a bunch of adults standing around crying or in shock, which could be very scary for him.

Be thoughtful about where to have the conversation. You want to tell your child about the death somewhere where he can feel free to have whatever reaction he is going to have, and that is probably not going to be a public place. You might have the impulse to lessen the blow by sharing the news in a happy location, like a favorite ice cream parlor, but know that a treat won't make the news any less sad or difficult for the child.

Try to use direct language and be prepared to give a brief explanation of how or why the death occurred because children will be curious. With kids you want to start with the minimum amount of information and then add more based on the questions they ask. As long as it's done in a calm and compassionate way, it is best to keep explanations shorter, simpler and more direct.

Guidelines to keep in mind

The words you choose will vary depending upon the child's age and developmental stage, but experts agree that no matter what the age of the child there are certain guidelines you should stick to.

- Follow their lead. The kinds of questions and concerns that children have can be very different from those of adults. Giving children too much information can overwhelm them. It is better to let them ask questions and then answer in the best (and most developmentally appropriate) way you can. Don't be surprised if young children are mostly concerned about themselves. That is simply how young children are.
- Encourage children to express their feelings. Do not try to "protect" or "shelter" children by attempting to hide your own sadness. They will invariably know that something is wrong, but will be left feeling alone and confused. Hiding your own grief can also make children feel like the sadness they may be feeling is bad. However, try not to let children see you at your most upset moments, as they may begin to worry about you or feel insecure.
- Don't use euphemisms. Avoid phrases like "passed away," "gone," "we lost him." Kids tend to be very literal, and this kind of fuzzy language leaves them anxious, scared and often confused. Or conversely, it may lead them to believe the deceased will come back and that death is not permanent.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible. Grief takes time but children benefit from the security of regular routines and knowing that life goes on.
- Memorialize the person who died. Remembering is part of grieving and part of healing. This can be as simple as sharing memories of the person who died or bringing up the name of the person who died so that your child knows it's not taboo to talk about and remember that person. It is important to keep photos

around, too vague and confusing phrases such as “put down.” Children told the pet has been “put to sleep” can develop a fear of going to sleep.

What to Expect With Kids Ages 4-7

Kids this age may still see death as reversible. They may draw inaccurate conclusions that they caused the death — something called “magical thinking.” They tend to ask a lot of concrete questions: “How did he die?” “What will happen to him now?”

- Possible expressions of grief: Nightmares, regression to earlier behaviors, changes in sleeping and eating, violent play, attempting to take on the role of the person who died.
- How you can help: Encourage expression of the child’s feelings through physical outlets as well as symbolic play (drawing and stories) and talking about the person who died.

What to Expect With Kids Ages 7-13

At this age kids’ thinking has matured and they are more logical. They may still want to see death as something that is reversible, but they are beginning to understand that it is final.

School-age children tend to ask specific questions and have a desire for detail. They may also be concerned for how others are responding to the death. They want to know what the “right” way to respond is, and are beginning to have the ability to mourn and to understand and recognize mourning in others.

Despite their more logical thinking they may become overly fearful of sickness and injury because they don't quite understand the mechanisms by which people die. Kids can also get fixated on why someone died, especially if it violates their logical principles of right and wrong. Under both of these circumstances try to help children develop an explanation for the death that makes sense to them. When they get older they can begin to understand the loss in a more sophisticated way.

- Possible expressions of grief: Regression, school problems, withdrawal from friends, acting out, changes in eating and sleeping habits, overwhelming concerns over their own body, thoughts about their own death.
- How you can help: Encourage the expression of feelings no matter what they are. Explain options and allow for choices around funerals and memorial services. Be present, but allow alone time, too. Encourage physical outlets. Don't avoid talking about the death or answering questions.

What to Expect With Kids Ages 13-18

Teenagers are capable of abstract thought and have a much more "adult" concept of death.

- Possible expressions of grief: Extreme sadness, denial, regression, risk-taking, preference for talking to peers and others outside of the family, depression, anger, acting out, even possible suicidal thoughts.
- How you can help: Encourage them to talk — if not to you, then to friends, teachers or a therapist. Do not attempt to "make it all better" or dismiss their grief. Allow them to mourn. Be available but respect their need to grieve in their own way.

When to Get Professional Help

Grieving is a natural process and it takes time. But symptoms that persist beyond six months or are very impairing can indicate that your child may need professional help to overcome her grief. Some signs your child may need professional help include:

- Nightmares
- Belief that the world is generally unsafe
- Irritability, anger and moodiness
- Poor concentration
- Appetite or sleep disturbances
- Ongoing behavior problems
- Persistent regression to earlier behavior in young children, such as clinging, bedwetting or thumb-sucking
- Difficulty sleeping
- Detachment or withdrawal from others
- Use of alcohol or drugs in teens
- Inability or refusal to go to school, learn or play with friends
- Anxiety
- Ongoing depression
- Suicidal thoughts

Taking Care of Yourself

While your first impulse may be to protect and comfort your children, it is crucial that you seek help for your own grief. If you are parenting or supporting a grieving child, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself, too.

Find good sources of support. Research shows us that how well a child does after a death is linked to how well the adults in his life are doing. This doesn't mean hiding your grief from your child. Rather, it means ensuring that you have people and activities in your life that provide comfort. If you need help or some time to take a break and clear your head, prioritize asking for it.

By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them. Be prepared to accept help from friends, relatives and possibly mental health professionals.

How Educators Can Help Kids

Schools play a major role in children's lives, and after a death — either a death in the family or in the extended school community — it is natural to expect that kids may experience grief that impacts their time at school or their ability to do schoolwork. Here are some guidelines for teachers and school psychologists on how to help make sure students feel supported and are coping in a healthy way.

- Return to routine. Help students return to a normal routine as soon as possible. Kids of all ages do better when they know what to expect, and routine makes them feel safe and reassures them that the adults are in control and keeping them safe. If it's one child who has suffered a loss, work with that child's parents or caregivers to resume a normal routine as much as possible even if it means modifying classroom work and/or homework for a period of time while the child is still grieving.
- Be alert. Teachers should watch for signs that a child might be struggling and need extra help. Kids who are unable to function in the classroom, withdraw from friends, display behavior problems or seem to be experiencing intense sadness,

fear or anger should be referred to a guidance counselor or school psychologist who should work with the parents to get the child professional help. Other signs a child may need help include physical manifestations of intense grief, including headaches, stomachaches, intense fatigue or inability to concentrate.

- Memorialize. For kids who are school-age (at least six or older), some kind of age-appropriate memorial is a helpful way to remember a teacher, administrator or student who has died. They should be kept relatively brief and tailored by grade level. A guidance counselor or school psychologist is often the best person to organize this kind of event with input from the family of the person who died.
- Stay in touch. Teachers and the school administration should stay in touch with parents in the days and weeks after the death has occurred. Parents should be kept up-to-date about the school's programs and activities so they can be prepared for discussions that may continue at home.
- Be alert. Teachers should watch for signs that a child might be struggling and need extra help. Kids who are unable to function in the classroom, withdraw from friend

Recommended Books for Kids

- *Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping With the Loss of a Parent*, by Donna Pincus, for ages 5 and up
- *I Miss You: A First Look at Death*, by Pat Thomas, for ages 4 and up
- *Good Answers to Tough Questions About Death*, by Joy Berry, for ages 6-12
- *A Complete Book About Death for Kids*, by Earl Grollman, for all ages
- *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*, by Lucille Clifton, for ages 5-8, about a father's death
- *My Grandson Lew*, by Charlotte Zolotow, for ages 5 and up, about a grandparent's death
- *When Something Terrible Happens*, by Marge Heegaard, for ages 8 and up

- *When Someone Very Special Dies*, by Marge Heegaard, for ages 8 and up
- *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies*, by Janis Silverman, for ages 8 and up
- *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, by Bryan Mellonie, for all ages
- *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*, by Leo Buscaglia, for all ages
- *The Next Place*, by Warren Hanson, for all ages

Resources in our Community

<p>211 Community HelpLine</p>	<p>The Garden: A Center for Grieving Children & Teens*</p> <p>168 Industrial Dr.</p> <p>Northampton, MA 01060</p> <p>(p) 413 582 5312 (f) 413 584 9615</p> <p>Slenn@cooleydickinson.org</p> <p>www.cooleydickinson.org/thegarden</p> <p>The Garden is a family support program that provides a safe place for youth (ages 5-18) and their families to meet others who are also grieving, share and develop a deeper understanding of their grief. The Garden also supports area schools through our School Outreach Program</p>	<p>Rick's Place, Inc.*</p> <p>35 Post Office Park, Suite 3514</p> <p>Wilbraham, MA 01095</p> <p>(413) 348-3120</p> <p>http://www.ricksplacema.org</p> <p>Rick's Place serves grieving children ages 5-18, and their caregivers, in bi-weekly programs. Facilitators work with grieving children in school-based programs and in library story times throughout Western Massachusetts.</p>
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