



Child Mind
Institute

Helping Children Cope With Grief

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS AND EDUCATORS



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 his 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.

With kids you want to start with the minimum amount of information and then add more based on the questions they ask.

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. You don't have to go into a lot of detail, however. 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.

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Is It Okay to Give Alone Time?

This depends somewhat on the particular child and on the child's age. Little kids go in and out of grieving mode so it is okay to let them play alone in a room as long as you stay nearby in case they switch back into grieving. Keep play dates shorter and at your home for a while so that you can monitor them.

For teens, alone time after delivering the news is certainly appropriate if they want it. And with both teens and younger kids you always want to ask open-ended questions like, "What do you think?" or, "How are you feeling?" Tell them you know this will take time to process and let them know they can always come back to you with questions or just to talk about the loved one who has died.

How to Handle a Major Event That Is Coming Up

If the death happens right around a holiday it's unrealistic to expect that you're really going to be able to have a happy celebration. You might be able to find moments of happiness, but chances are everyone is going to be preoccupied with the loss of the person who has died and you shouldn't try to hide or force your child to hide her grief. That said, you should still acknowledge important occasions, such as a child's birthday or graduation, because ignoring them could also be painful.

If the person who has died is close, the whole year is going to be a year of "firsts" without that person, so celebrations like the first Thanksgiving, birthday, Christmas or Hanukkah without that person are going to be hard. Do what you can to maintain traditions as much as possible, but know, once again, that you and your child will likely experience moments of joy along with some sorrow.

Deciding Whether or Not to Attend the Funeral

Funerals, wakes and memorial services are an important part of the grieving process and a way to say goodbye to the person who has died. But when it comes to whether a child should attend the funeral of a loved one, there is no right or wrong answer. A child should never be forced to attend a funeral. If he indicates that he wants to go, then he should be encouraged to do so. If the child is young, plan to bring a favorite babysitter or someone the child trusts who can leave with the child if he decides he's had enough before the service is over.

Be sure to prepare your child for what he will see. Let him know that people might be dressed in dark colors and that they will be very sad and some might be crying, for example. Explain if there will be a casket that contains the body, and any other important details.

What to Expect With Kids Ages 2-4

At this age kids lack a real understanding of death and are generally unable to process the permanence of it. They are very present-oriented and don't understand that death means "forever." They may ask the same questions over and over again. Be patient, consistent and reassuring. A child who is grieving may have a series of brief but intense responses.

- **Possible expressions of grief:** Regression to earlier behaviors like thumb sucking and bedwetting, sleep problems, irritability, confusion.
- **How you can help:** Provide honest, direct, brief answers to their questions and lots of reassurance and affection. A consistent routine is also helpful. At this age play is their outlet for grieving.

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?"

School-age children tend to ask specific questions and have a desire for detail.

- **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.
- **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 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
- Anxiety
- Ongoing depression
- Suicidal thoughts
- Inability or refusal to go to school, learn or play with friends

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.

Kids of all ages do better when they know what to expect.