



Helping a Child Grieve

Children are often the forgotten grievers in the family. They are experiencing many of the same emotions you are, so share thoughts and tears with them. Though it is a painful time, be sure they feel loved and included.

As in all situations, honesty is the best way to deal with children. Talk to the child in a language that they can understand. Remember to listen to the child and try to understand what they are saying and, just as importantly, what they're not saying. Children need to feel that the death is an open subject and that they can express their thoughts or questions as they arise. Below are just a few ways adults can help children face the death of someone close to them.

- As soon as possible after the death, set time aside to talk to the child.
- Give the child the facts in a simple manner – be careful not to go into too much detail. Understand the age and level of comprehension of your child. Speak to that level.
- Invite the child to come back to you if he or she has more questions or has heard rumors so that you can help him or her to get the correct information. Reassure them that you will give honest, simple answers that they will understand. Repeated questions require patience and continued expression of caring.
- If you can't answer their question, it's OK to say "I don't know how to answer that, but perhaps we can find someone to help us
- Use the correct language – say the words "dead" and "die". Do not use phrases such as, "He's sleeping...", or "God took her...", "went away...".
- Ask questions. "What are you feeling? What have you heard from your friends?" "What do you think has happened?" etc.
- Explain your feelings to your children, especially if you are crying. Give them permission to cry too. It is helpful to cry. It is not helpful to be told how one should or should not feel. We are their role models: it is good for children to see our sadness and to share our feelings with them
- Talk about feelings, such as angry, sad, feeling responsible, scared, tearful, depressed, wishing to die too, etc. Share your feelings to help the children name their own. Emphasize that all feelings are normal and okay. Help children learn healthy ways to express themselves
- Use the given name of the deceased when speaking of him/her.

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- Read a book on childhood grief so you have a better understanding of what they may be experiencing.
- Read an age appropriate book on death education, including funerals and burial customs to your child.
- Talk about the visitation period and funeral. Explain what happens there and find out if your child wants to attend with the rest of your family.
- Think about ways that a child can say good-bye to the deceased, such as writing a letter, poem, drawing a picture, etc.
- Talk to your child about your religious beliefs, if appropriate, and what happens to people after they die.
- Talk about memories, good ones and ones that may not be so good.
- Watch out for “bad dreams” – are they occurring often? Talk about the dreams: they are a way to discharge stress.
- Watch for behaviour changes in your child – if they are cause for concern, learn what services are available through churches, schools, community agencies and professional counseling.
- Friends, family and schoolmates frequently find solace and comfort in doing something special in the name of the person who has died.
- Sudden death, violent death and the death of a young person are especially hard to grieve. Disruption of sleep, appetite, and daily activities may be normal responses to an abnormal or unusual event.
- Try to maintain as normal a routine as possible even though this is a very difficult time for you. Avoid any unnecessary changes, as each change may add additional stress.
- Show affection, and assure the child that those who love them still do and that they will take care of them.
- Answers should be based on the needs the child seems to be expressing, not necessarily on the exact words used.
- Encourage the child to talk about their feelings and share with them how you feel. You are a real model for how one expresses feelings.
- Allow the child to express their caring for you. Loving is giving “and” taking.
- Reassure the child about the cause of the death and explain that any thoughts they may have had about the person who died did not cause the death.
- Reassure them that this does “not” mean someone else they love is likely to die soon.

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- Explain and include them in deciding how they will participate. Remember that they should be prepared beforehand, told what to expect, and have a supporting adult with them. Do not force them to do anything they don't feel comfortable doing.
- A common reaction to stress is reverting to an earlier stage of development. (For example, a child may begin thumb sucking, or bed-wetting, or may need to go back into diapers or have a bottle for a time). Support the child in this and keep in mind that these regressions are temporary.

***In helping children understand and cope with death,
remember four things:***

***Be loving.
Be accepting.
Be truthful.
Be consistent.***

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