



SEEDS OF HOPE

CHILDREN'S GRIEF: Five Key Questions, Answered



CAMMY ADLER-ROTH, LICSW, CCLS
CHILDREN'S PROGRAM MANAGER
CARE DIMENSIONS

How widespread is children's grief?

It's estimated that in Massachusetts, 1 in 15 children will be bereaved by a parent or sibling by their 18th birthday. That's at least one child in every classroom. This rate more than doubles by the time they turn 25. And of course, this statistic does not include children grieving the death of a grandparent, aunt/uncle, cousin, friend or even pet.

What does a normal grief response look like in children?

Grief responses vary based on a child's developmental age and life experiences. It's not uncommon for children to appear to be acting "normally" after a significant death. Children often do not have words to express their grief. Instead, they may process their feelings through play or other expressive activities such as art, music, physical activity etc. Frequently, children's grief responses can be triggered by seemingly smaller losses in their life. For example, if a child seems to be over-reacting to misplacing a favorite sweatshirt, it could be that those feelings of loss are opening the floodgates to their feelings of grief related to the death. Feelings of anger, confusion, guilt, sadness, relief, and even happiness are all normal for grieving children. It's also important to be aware of how secondary losses (loss of routine, loss of financial stability, loss of attention from a parent, etc) may impact the child.

How do I know what kind of help a grieving child needs?

Grief is a normal response to loss and not all grief requires professional help. Children who cope best with grief are often those who have cognizant adults in their life. It's also important for adults in their family to model expressing grief and using healthy coping skills. It's important to follow the lead of the child. Some may be interested in having someone outside of their family to talk to. This could be a grief counselor, school guidance counselor, or clergy person. Many might benefit from being around peers who have experienced similar losses (grief camps, peer support groups, or informal relationships with other grieving kids in their community). Some kids want this type of support early on, others find it more helpful months or even years after the loss occurs.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide to children's grief was compiled by Care Dimensions, a provider of palliative and end-of-life care in Massachusetts.

The Parmenter Foundation provides support for compassionate end-of-life care and bereavement programs in MetroWest Boston.

To learn more about Care Dimensions:



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How long does grief last in children?

A major loss will impact a child into adulthood. That's normal and expected. Children don't simply "get over" their grief and "move on". Instead they "move forward," finding ways to integrate the loss into their life by discovering traditions and rituals to maintain a connection with the person who died. As children reach new developmental milestones, their grief will change and they may "re-grieve" as they understand how the loss affects them in new ways. For example, a child who loses a parent at age 5 may be most concerned with the immediate impact (who will put me to bed at night?). 10 years later, as that teen begins to look toward their future, they may think about the milestones ahead (such as prom, graduation, wedding day, etc) and how the absence of that person will impact their experience on those special days.

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1 in 15 children will be bereaved by a
parent or sibling by their 18th birthday.**

(Judi's House. (2020). Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model. Retrieved from www.judishouse.org/CBEM).

What things can I say to help a grieving child feel better?

It's natural for grown-ups to want to take away the pain experienced by children, but the truth is grief isn't something we can fix or make go away. When we say things to try to make it better, it can invalidate a child's feelings or confuse them. Young children are concrete thinkers, so when we say things like "they are in a better place" the child may feel confused about why their person wants to be away from them. They may not understand why they can't visit the "better place". Other statements such as "at least you had a chance to say goodbye" or "at least you still have another parent" are invalidating. Avoid telling a child how to feel or act. Instead, try to make simple statements that acknowledge their experience and express support such as "I heard that your Dad died. I've been thinking a lot about you and am here to listen if you ever want to talk." Don't be afraid to mention the deceased's name or share memories. You won't remind the child of the death; they haven't forgotten. Instead, you'll remind them that you remember. "Tomorrow night is our open house. I remember last year I met your Dad at the open house. He was very proud to be your Dad and told me about a fun trip you two took over the summer."

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THE PARMENTER FOUNDATION

260 BOSTON POST ROAD, SUITE 5
WAYLAND, MA 01778
(508) 358-3001

