



SEEDS OF HOPE

CHILDREN'S GRIEF: Do's and Don'ts When Talking to a Grieving Child



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DO: Acknowledge the loss.

By not acknowledging the loss, you leave a child wondering: Have you forgotten? Do you not know about the loss? Do you not care? This can make a child feel isolated and alone.

DON'T: Avoid talking about the deceased person.

Children often fear that they will forget about the person. Talking about the deceased person, including specific memories and anecdotes, helps children feel comforted and maintain important memories. Also, use the deceased person's name when speaking about him/her.

DO: Use direct language.

Honest language is incredibly important when talking to children who have experienced a loss. We often try to protect the feelings of children by using softer language, which may only raise confusion. For example, when a person has died, we need to use that word, "died," to leave no uncertainty around what has happened.

DON'T: Use euphemisms or "soft" language.

When we use euphemisms regarding a person's death such as, "We lost your father," or "Your mother has gone to sleep," we can create confusion and even fear in children. They may end up afraid to go to sleep each night or wonder why we aren't able to look for the "lost" person.

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:



**Kids need to
know how to talk to
grieving kids too!**

THEY CAN SAY:

"I know your dad died. I'm really sorry."

"I know your mom meant a lot to you."

"I remember meeting your brother.
[Share a memory]."

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DO: Use age-appropriate language.

Younger children will need very simple, short answers. As children get older, they will have a better cognitive understanding of death and dying and can digest more complex discussions. No matter the age, it is still important to be direct and ensure children understand the meaning of the language you use.

DON'T: Overwhelm with too much information.

You may feel inclined to give as much information as possible, but children can be easily overwhelmed. It is important to follow children's leads in these conversations; by asking if they have any questions can help you to know how much information to share.

DO: Allow feelings into the conversation.

It is critically important to validate children's feelings and not ignore them or suppress them. Sharing your own feelings and emotions, even crying, can also demonstrate to children that they are not alone. However, be careful not to make a child feel responsible for taking care of you.

DON'T: Tell children how to feel or how to act.

We may be inclined to make statements to grieving children such as, "You need to be strong for your family," or "Now you are the man of the house." Phrases like these can not only invalidate children's feelings but also imply to them that their feelings are less important than how they should be behaving in their homes or in front of other people.

DO: Recognize this is a lifelong conversation.

Sitting down to talk to children about their grief is not a one-time event. The losses children suffer will always be part of their lives. They will see future life events through the lens of those losses. They will grow more cognitively aware of their feelings as they grow older and need more information to satisfy that awareness.

DON'T: Say anything just to fill uncomfortable silences.

Acknowledging children's losses may not require speaking at all. When you don't have the words – or if the child isn't ready to hear them – you do not always need to fill the silences. Sometimes just sitting quietly and letting children feel you are there with them, and that they are not alone, is very powerful. You may also say, "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I'm here."

Dr. Brené Brown, in her research on empathy, notes that "Rarely, if ever, does an empathetic statement begin with:

"At least."

"At least they're not suffering anymore," or "At least you still have another parent," or "At least you got to say good-bye," may be technically true, they can be incredibly invalidating to what a child is experiencing in the moment.

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