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- Kaplan Family Hospice House and Care Dimensions Hospice House
- Grief support
- Education and training

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Children, Teens and Grief

A Guide For Families



Experiencing Grief

It's natural to want to protect children from painful emotions. But children need time to work through their emotions, safe places to grieve and the opportunity to say good-bye, just like adults.

This booklet will help you and your child prepare for what lies ahead after the loss of a loved one. You'll learn common grief reactions, tools to help them through grief and how to give them opportunities to say good-bye. In addition, you will be able to recognize grief at all ages and get answers to some of your toughest questions.

Adults may think children can't understand death. But with help, children can learn that death is a natural part of life. You can show your children it's okay to grieve and help them understand that the feelings that they experience are normal.



Understanding Your Child's Reactions

After someone dies, children will express their grief reactions and feelings in a variety of ways. It is important to remember that these reactions can come and go, and that your child is likely to experience the loss differently as she grows older.

Regardless of a child's age, there are ways you can help support them through their grief. Be available, and give them space when they ask for it. What is most important is that children feel they have some sense of choice and control. Give them opportunities, but don't force them into situations they are uninterested in.

Be honest and direct with your child and remember that if children are asking questions, they are prepared for an answer. Be thoughtful about the language you use.

Remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief emotions may come and go like waves. As normal as any of these reactions are, it is also normal for your child to not experience these particular responses. Follow your child's lead and trust in their grief process.



Normal Grief Reactions

- Acting “normal” as if the death did not occur
- Regression
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Changes in appetite
- Lacking concentration
- Increased irritability
- Displaying interest in things that are dead
- Changes in academic performance
- Withdrawing
- Separation anxiety
- Hearing and/or talking to the deceased
- Feelings of relief, guilt, anger, loneliness, confusion, sadness, emptiness, anxiety, etc.

Infants and Toddlers

- Sense a change in routine
- React to the emotions of adults
- Might be cranky, clingy or have excessive crying
- Slight skin rash
- Sleep disturbances
- Anxious or upset when separated from people who take care of them

Try to stick to usual routines and schedules as much as possible.

Stay physically close to help young children feel safe.

Ages 3 - 6

- Have some understanding about death, but think it's only temporary and that deceased people can return
- Feel they somehow caused the death
- Act out feelings while playing
- Repeatedly may ask when the dead person will return
- May have abdominal pain
- Trouble concentrating at school and daydreaming
- May show aggression, feel sad, anxious, scared or cranky — may cry or fight
- May regress to baby talk, thumb sucking or wetting the bed

Use simple terms and explanations. For example, say “Grandma’s body got very, very sick and the doctors and medicine couldn’t make her better.” Make sure children know they didn’t cause the death.

Ages 6 - 9

- Begin to understand that death is final
- Need or want details about how the person died
- May deny that the death happened
- Fear that other loved ones will die
- May have nightmares
- Exhibit trouble concentrating, especially at school
- May display an increase in neediness, aggression or good behavior

Talk to your children about the reasons why people have to die and encourage them to ask questions. Reassure them that there will always be adults to help care for them.



Ages 9 - 12

- Understand that death is inevitable and happens to everyone
- Feelings of anger, guilt, fear or confusion
- May become aggressive or violent
- May withdraw from others and try to hide their feelings
- May deny feelings of sadness or insist that they don’t care

Communicate openly with children in this age group about the person who died and encourage them to express these feelings appropriately. Let the children know it’s okay to show emotions by showing your own.

Teens

- Preoccupation with death
- Will say they don’t need any help
- Act like they don’t want to talk about death
- May turn to drug or alcohol abuse
- React by taking care of others
- Feel angry or guilty
- May experience chronic depression, sleep difficulties, restlessness and low self-esteem
- May display over-exaggerated outpouring of emotions



Provide structure and guidance even if the teens resist. Maintain family closeness, but respect privacy. Allow more time than usual with friends.

Help Your Child Grieve

Answer Questions Fully — Keep it Simple

Explain what “dead” means: the person’s body “stopped working.” If you use the words “passed away,” be sure to explain what that means. Don’t say the person “went away” or “went to sleep.” A child may believe the person will come back or wake up. Or, the child may fear going to sleep, thinking she will also die.

Be Honest

If someone died of cancer, say the person was “very, very sick from an illness called cancer.” This helps calm a child’s fears by showing the difference between a serious disease and a minor illness, such as a cold.

Encourage and Respect Your Child’s Feelings

Children don’t always know how to express their feelings, or they may be afraid to. The intense feelings associated with death often feel unfamiliar. Tell the child it’s okay to cry or feel angry or sad when someone dies. Allow the child to see you or other adults cry and express emotion. Let them know it’s okay to continue playing. Talk about remembering happy memories of the person who died.

Be Consistent in Routines

Keeping every day routines consistent gives children a sense of safety and security. Continue to set limits as you did before. Instead of talking about feelings, a child often acts them out. Allow room and materials to do this (blocks, pillows, soft toys, stuffed animals, etc.)

Be Patient and Understanding

There is no set amount of time to grieve. All children react differently to the death of a loved one. Let your child know you are always there to help and to listen when she needs to talk.

Give Plenty of Hugs

Physical touch can help your child feel secure enough to express emotions. It can also calm his fears that you, too, may die. Some kids may prefer not to be touched. Always ask first and respect their answer even if it is no.

Show Your Grief

Express your emotions and show you care by talking openly about feelings: “This is a very difficult time for all of us. There will be times that you may see me cry and be upset, maybe even angry. But I’m not angry with you. I love you very much! This is a time of feeling very sad. If you feel like you want to cry, that’s okay, too.” When adults show emotions, they model for children that this is healthy. Adults can also name things that might feel supportive (hug, walk, talking, quiet time, etc.).



Talk at the Child's Eye Level

Touch or hold her to keep her feeling safe, secure and loved. Speak directly and avoid clichés such as, “you have to be brave now,” or “show everyone what a big girl you are.” Even if your voice is tearful, talking helps her cope at this difficult time.

Avoid phrases such as “lost” or “taken from us” as they may give mixed messages. Remember, children think in concrete terms. Simple explanations are necessary. Even hugs and sitting close can say a lot.

Be Prepared for Tough Questions

Often children bring up questions like, “Where does the body go,” “Is there life after death?,” “How will we get along without this person to love us, take care of the house or pay the bills?” Prepare yourself ahead of time for these types of questions. Be open, honest and direct. This needs to be a sharing time. It's okay to say, “I don't have all the answers, but we'll try to work it out.” You can also turn some questions back to the child, “what do you think happens to someone after they die?”

Help Your Child Say Good-bye

Saying good-bye is important to children of all ages because it helps validate, commemorate and remember their loved one. Here are some suggested activities to help you and your family grieve and begin to heal together.

Write a Letter

Suggest your child write a letter to the person who has died. This may enable him to say some things that were unexpressed at the time of the death, for whatever reason. The child may want the letter placed in the casket, left at the grave or he may want to hold onto it.

Draw

This may be easier than writing, especially for younger children. A child can draw a picture of something that reminds her of her loved one. Drawing offers a joyful form of expression for children.

Remember the Person Who Died

Talk about the person by recalling family events and stories about the person. Encourage your child to share his favorite memories. Show your child that it is okay to laugh and recall happy times.

Create a Scrapbook or Memory Album

Children have a limited ability to recall past events. Use pictures and other memorabilia to remind your children of their loved one. A child may want to keep something that belonged to the person, record “favorites” of the deceased, write or draw pictures. The more the memories are discussed, the easier they are to remember.

Create a Pillow

Use an old shirt or blanket of the person who died to create a pillow or quilt square for the child to keep.



Visit the Grave or Special Place

Visiting the grave helps the child understand where the physical body has been placed. If the person's body was cremated, think of a spot that was meaningful to him/her. There your child can spend special time remembering the loved one.

Create a Special Ceremony

Light a candle, say a prayer, recite a poem or hold a special memorial service that your child helps plan. Another option is to plant a tree or flowers. Small acts mean a great deal to children who are grieving. Allowing them this time to celebrate the life of their loved one helps them honor them in their own special way.



Answers to Tough Questions

Should a child visit a dying loved one?

Yes, if he wants to. Acknowledge fears and feelings related to visiting someone that is very sick and clarify misconceptions. Prepare them for the visit by describing the loved one's surroundings. If the loved one looks/acts different, explain what the changes are. Remind the child that "Even though Grampy may look different, he's still the same person on the inside." Remind the child that this is a good opportunity to continue making memories while the person is still alive. Children deserve time to experience the dying process and say goodbye.

How do I talk to my child about an unexpected death?

A murder, suicide, or a death by accident for instance, can cause intense emotions. A child may feel she caused the death. Always be honest and open using age-appropriate language to help clarify misconceptions.

Because each situation is unique, we suggest contacting your caregiver, social worker or calling Care Dimensions' Grief Support staff at 855-774-5100 for specific recommendations on how to tell your child about a traumatic and/or sudden death.

Should my child attend the services?

Yes, if the child wants to. Give him a simple explanation such as, “This is a special time when people get together to say good-bye to someone they care about.” Ask him if he wants to attend; give him the choice. If your child is going, let him know what to expect. Describe or visit the funeral home or place of worship before the service. If the body is to be on view, be honest and give details of what he will see and discuss how that will be the last time they will be able to see their loved one’s body. Talk about it. Consider having an adult available to spend time with kids in another room or take kids home early if things begin to feel overwhelming.

How do I know if my child needs more support with their grief?

Children who are grieving may benefit from being around other children who have experienced a similar loss. It is normal that they may exhibit some of these symptoms: sudden behavior changes, nightmares or fear of being alone, withdrawal, depression, constant changes in school performance or continuous physical complaints (headache or stomach ache). If these problems seem extreme or persistent be sure to seek professional help.

For additional information and support for children and families who are grieving, please contact our children’s program at 855-774-5100.

Care Dimensions’ Grief Support program guides people through the difficult times that follow the loss of someone special. We help you understand what you’re experiencing, and identify resources to help you manage. We give you a variety of options for learning more about grief and your feelings, whether you prefer individual or group assistance. At the same time, the program is dedicated to helping others learn how to support and comfort loved ones who are grieving.

