



**Kids grieve, too!**





We all grieve. It's a natural reaction to any change or loss. And, just like adults, every kid grieves differently. From shutting down—to crying, curiosity or acting out—there really is no right or wrong way to grieve.

So often, adults try to protect children and teens from tragic events like death by avoiding conversation and pretending like nothing happened. But the truth is, kids grieve, too!

It's our job as caregivers to teach and model what good grief looks like and to support youth in finding healthy ways to adjust and cope along their grief journey.

## Children's bereavement responses

According to Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., "Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve." However, a child's concept of death, grief response and signs of distress vary at different ages.

### BIRTH TO TWO YEARS

**Concept:** *Death is experienced as feeling separated or abandoned by their loved one that died.*

#### Grief response

- The child senses the person is gone but does not understand permanency
- Responds to the emotions and behaviors of the caregiver

**Signs of distress:** *Clingy, temper tantrums, crying, change in eating and sleeping habits*

#### Suggestions

- Simple, honest explanation of death with familiar examples
- Physical comforting
- Consistent routine

### TWO TO FOUR YEARS

**Concept:** *Death is seen as abandonment, sleeping, temporary, reversible or contagious.*

#### Grief response

- Brief but intense responses
- Reacts to changes in routine
- Asks repeated questions
- Anxious about basic needs being met



**Signs of distress:** *Regression (lapses in toilet training, return to security blanket or old toys), confusion, nightmares, anxiety at bedtime, fear of abandonment, seeking physical contact, irritability, tantrums*

### **Suggestions**

- Simple, honest explanation of death with frequent repetition
- Physical comforting
- Consistent routine
- Reassure that death is not contagious and that they will be taken care of
- Allow some regression

## FOUR TO SEVEN YEARS

**Concept:** *Death is still seen as temporary and reversible and that if you are careful you can avoid death.*

### Grief response

- Feels responsible for death due to magical thinking (I was mad at her and wished she would die. I made it happen.)
- Repetitive questioning: How? Why?
- May act as though nothing happened
- Feels distressed and confused
- Expresses self through play – inability in the moment to acknowledge very painful reality

**Signs of distress:** *Overt signs of grief (sadness, anger, confusion and difficulty eating and sleeping); feelings of abandonment and rejection; violent play; behavior problems; attempts to take on role of person who died; models grief reactions of adult caregivers; and some regression.*

### Suggestions

- Simple, honest explanation of death
- Avoid euphemisms (sleep, gone away, lost)
- Check to see if child understands explanation
- Expect repeated questions
- Encourage expression of feelings
- Reassure they are not responsible for death

## SEVEN TO 11 YEARS

**Concept:** *At this age, children may still see death as reversible but are beginning to understand its' finality. Death is also seen as punishment for bad behavior and/or bad thoughts. Children do not typically think death is something that can happen to them.*

### Grief response

- May feel responsible for death
- Curious about details of death and may ask specific questions
- Concerned about how others are responding and whether they are reacting the right way
- Feels distressed and confused
- Starting to have the ability to mourn and understand death



**Signs of distress:** *Overt signs (sadness, anger, shock, denial); physical complaints; overactive to avoid thinking about death; withdrawn, acting out; concern with own body; desire to join deceased; and attempt to assume role of deceased.*

### Suggestions

- Answer questions
- Provide opportunity to express range of feelings
- Teach skills to cope with anger and provide physical outlets
- Reassure they are not responsible for death

## TWELVE TO 17 YEARS

**Concept:** *Death is inevitable, universal and irreversible. Child begins to have the ability to think abstractly and is able to conceptualize death.*

### Grief response

- More apt to talk to people outside of family, such as peers or friends
- May feel embarrassed and try to cover up feelings
- Questions about religion/spirituality
- Places peer needs ahead of family
- Traditional mourning—crying and sadness
- Concern for practical issues such as household needs and personal care



**Signs of distress:** *Depression, anger, mood swings, withdrawn, sullen; regression (pouting, aggression, desire for a special “friend” – stuffed animal for comfort); difficulty concentrating; physical complaints; and may push limits – engage in high-risk behaviors (sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol use).*

### Suggestions

- Use direct, open dialogue about death
- Encourage teen to talk about their feelings with a trusted adult or friend
- Listen when they are ready to talk
- Provide consistent limits, balanced with freedom and choices
- Do not attempt to take grief away

## Informing a child of a death or pending death

- Assess your own emotional state and determine your need for personal support while telling a child or adolescent about a recent death
- Keep it simple. Use the word “died” instead of indirect terms such as “passed” or “lost”
- Allow questions and give honest, simple and age-appropriate answers
- Validate any observed raw emotions and provide reassurance of the child’s safety and security
- Allow choices regarding seeing the deceased, attending the funeral and participating in the ceremonies
- Prepare the youth whenever possible regarding upcoming events, changes and what to expect

## Preparing a child for the death of a loved one

- Ask the child what they know about the person’s health condition, paying attention to any misconceptions or misunderstanding
- Younger children frequently exhibit magical thinking and believe the death was their fault. Gently comfort and reassure that they did not cause their loved one to be sick or die
- Present information in a calm and gentle manner
- Children can usually only take in little bits of information at a time. Watch for signs that they have reached their limit and revisit at a later date
- Allow the youth opportunity to ask questions

## What about the funeral?

- Provide information to the child about the event: Who will be there, what he will see, what will happen, etc.
- Know that children may not fully understand all of the concepts and reasons for a funeral, but being able to be a part of the ceremony often helps children to feel included and a part of the family as a whole
- Allow child to make the decision about attending and participating in the service and honor their choice
- Explain the purpose of the ceremony – a time to help, support and comfort each other, as well as honor the life of the person that has died
- Take opportunities to affirm that life does go on even after the death of a loved one
- Before and after, children may need physical closeness and comfort. A hug or a hand to hold can be more beneficial than any words that could be said.

## Words that can hurt

- I know exactly how you feel
- It's all going to be OK
- Try not to think about it
- He's in a better place
- God needed her more than we did
- Don't cry—tears won't bring him back
- Be strong
- Forget about it
- You are the man/woman of the house now
- You should feel proud, relieved, happy, sad, etc.



## Spirituality

- It's natural for youth, and really anyone, to question their own thoughts and beliefs about God and spirituality in the midst of dealing with the death of a loved one
- Do not expect yourself to be able to explain everything there is to know about spirituality or to have all of the answers to the youth's questions
- Give the child an opportunity to talk about their own personal beliefs and do not feel the need to correct or change their beliefs in this time of grief
- Avoid saying that God needed their special loved one, that their loved one is in a better place or that God needed another good person in Heaven. A child's tendency for magical thinking and lack of abstract thoughts prevents them from understanding these concepts and seeks to place blame on God or religion.

## Help your child grieve in a healthy way

- When they are ready to talk, be ready to listen
- Be honest and answer questions with age-appropriate answers
- Provide a calm, compassionate presence for the child. Sometimes saying nothing is better than anything you could try to say to make it “better”
- Maintain routine and consistency wherever possible (Regular meals, scheduled bedtimes, school attendance, etc.)
- Be a model of what good grief looks like. Kids will watch what you do to determine what grief is supposed to look like
- Allow and encourage your child to remember and identify ways to honor their special person
- Remember special days (holidays, anniversaries and birthdays) will impact the youth - prepare accordingly
- Inform your child’s teacher and other important adults of the death to prepare them for possible grief reactions that impact school functioning and behavior
- Hug with permission
- Look for ways to increase safety and security for a child in this time of grief



## When to seek additional support

- Significant or long-term changes in sleep or appetite
- Destructive behavior or extreme aggressive behavior
- Panic attacks or ongoing, irrational fears
- Multiple traumatic events
- Significant changes in interactions with peers or behavioral changes at home or school
- Talk of a plan to hurt themselves or others. While it's a natural reaction to think about death and joining their special person, be alert to a child who seems to think about death constantly or shares thoughts of suicide or a plan to hurt others.

## Community Health Network resources

Community Home Health In-Touch Bereavement: 317.621.4646

Community Healing Hearts Youth Bereavement Services: 317.621.4646

Community Behavioral Care Services: 317.621.5719

24-hour crisis line: 800.662.3445 or 317.621.5700



## Helpful online resources

- National Alliance for Grieving Children: [childrengrieve.org](http://childrengrieve.org)
- New York Life Foundation: [newyorklife.com/foundation](http://newyorklife.com/foundation)
- Moyer Foundation: [moyerfoundation.org](http://moyerfoundation.org)

## Books on grief

Many can be found at your local library

### FOR TEENS

- Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas (Alan Wolfelt)
- The Next Place (Warren Hanson)
- Grief Skills for Life: A Personal Journal for Adolescents About Loss (Judy Davidson)
- If Only (Carole Geither)

### FOR CHILDREN

- What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies (Trevor Romain)
- A Terrible Thing Happened (Margaret Holmes)
- I Miss You: A First Look at Death (Pat Thomas & Leslie Harker)
- Always and Forever (Alan Durant)
- The Boy Who Didn't Want to Be Sad (Rob Goldblatt)
- The Invisible String (Patricia Karst)
- The Scar (Charlotte Moundlic)
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death (Laurie Krasny Brown)
- When Someone Very Special Dies (Marge Heegaard)



## FOR CAREGIVERS

- [35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child](#) (The Dougy Center for Grieving Children)
- [Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies](#) (Janis Silverman)
- [Helping Children Cope with Death](#) (The Dougy Center for Grieving Children)
- [Helping Teens Cope with Death](#) (The Dougy Center for Grieving Children)
- [Tear Soup](#) (Pat Schwiebert)

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