

## The Parent's Guide to the Grieving Child

### Do:

- Be available to listen.
- Follow routines; they provide a sense of safety and comfort.
- Contact the school after the death and direct school staff about what should be shared as well as your comfort level with school grief support.
- Prepare child for return to school. Make a plan to establish a safe place to be alone at school if needed for the child. Include your child in the planning.
- Identify a safe person the child may talk with at school.
- Modify academic expectations as needed.
- Set limits and address risk taking behavior immediately.
- Use age appropriate language.
- Create a time to memorialize the deceased.

### Do Say:

- "I know you are sad/angry/in pain..."
- "This must be a hard time for you..."
- "I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking."
- "It can be hard to understand why these things happen."
- "Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable."
- "Expressing your tears and pain can help you through this hard time."
- "We'll get through this together."

### Do not:

- Act as if nothing happened.
- Make statements about how people will or will not feel in the future.
- Force a child to talk about his/her feelings; assure your willingness to listen when he/she is ready.
- Assume that the child is coping well, even if he/she appears to be.
- Take a grieving child's anger personally.
- Neglect your own grieving process; this will spill over and affect your child.
- Allow your own emotions to get in the way of being helpful.
- Expect the child to finish all assignments on time.

### Avoid Saying:

- "You will get over it."
- "You should be over this by now."
- "I know just how you feel."
- "You should/shouldn't feel like..."
- "Count your blessings..."
- "Things could be worse..."
- "Your loved one is better off."
- "You'll be stronger for this."
- "Be strong for your mother, siblings, etc."
- "God has a reason for everything, even this."
- "This was God's will."
- I'm sorry for your loss (children & teens find this redundant.)
- "They're in a better place."

## Helping Children with the BIG Feelings of Grief

The impact of death is overwhelming for children, especially as they deal with the rigors of school, stressful peer interactions, and changes at home. Often, children are not equipped with the skills needed to deal with these “BIG” feelings of grief. Unfortunately, in the weeks and months following a death, the adults that have helped them cope in the past are very busy with their own emotions and life changes. If unexpressed, feelings intensify and become even more difficult for a child to manage. Here are several ideas for helping children with their “BIG” feelings of grief:

- **Use honesty and simplicity** when describing what happened. Children may become confused with inaccurate terms to describe dying, such as, “your grandpa is sleeping,” “we lost your mother today,” “your aunt passed away,” etc. Use words such as “dead” and “died”. Older children may want detailed descriptions of how the person died. Seek advice from a professional if you are unsure how or what to tell your child.
- **Be available to listen** when they are ready to talk. Sometimes children are not ready to talk when we are ready to listen. If so, tell them you can be available when they are ready. When listening, give your undivided attention (no calls or other interruptions).
- **Describe the feelings of grief** they could expect to have – sad, angry, guilty, scared, worried. Give examples of how you have dealt with some of these feelings. Address fears by telling them what you are doing to keep them safe and healthy. If the person died of illness, be sure to emphasize the fact that most people recover from illnesses.
- **Demonstrate and discuss appropriate ways to express feelings.** It is okay to share your sadness and tears with your children. Children may avoid activities or conversations to prevent their family members from crying or feeling sad. Reassure them that its okay if you cry after they say or do something and they are not responsible for your tears. Be sure they know that crying can help them feel better.

Understand that anger is important for children to express, and try not to take their anger personally. Give them ideas of how to let out anger without getting in trouble, i.e. punch a pillow, run fast, talk about it, etc. Feelings can also be expressed by writing, drawing, sculpting or doing other art projects.

- **Encourage involvement in memorializing activities.** If possible, include children in planning the funeral or memorial services. Be sure to explain what will happen during the different parts of the service.

Involve children in remembering activities: collecting photos, retelling their stories, or creating a memory box with mementos of your loved one. In addition, make plans to remember your loved one on special occasions and holidays.

# GRIEF REACTIONS

## PHYSICAL



- Appetite – loss or increase
- Breathing difficulties
- Chest tightness
- Cold hands
- Crying
- Dizziness or fainting spells
- Dry mouth
- Headaches
- Hives, rashes, itching
- Indigestion
- Low resistance to illness and infection
- Muscle tightness
- Nightmares
- Numbness or tingling
- Rapid heart beat
- Shaking
- Sighing
- Sleeping difficulties - too much, too little
- Slowed speech
- Stuttering
- Stomach problems, butterflies
- Sweating
- Tearfulness
- Trembling
- Voice – change of pitch
- Weakness – especially in legs
- Weight gain or loss



## BEHAVIORAL

- Absent mindedness
- Accident proneness
- Clumsiness
- Eating difficulties
- Fingernail biting
- Hair twisting
- Nightmares
- Restlessness
- Searching and calling out
- Teeth grinding
- Treasuring objects of the deceased
- Visiting places of the deceased

## EMOTIONAL/SOCIAL



- Anger or angry outbursts
- Anxiousness
- Blaming others
- Critical of self
- Crying
- Depression
- Dread
- Fearful
- Freedom
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive behavior
- Indecisiveness
- Irritability
- Jealousy
- Loneliness
- Longing
- Loss of interest in living
- Low self-esteem
- Moodiness or mood swings
- Relief
- Restlessness
- Sadness
- Shock
- Suspiciousness
- Withdrawal from activity
- Worthlessness



## INTELLECTUAL/COGNITIVE

- Concentration difficulties
- Confusion
- Disbelief
- Errors in:
  - Judging distances
  - Grammar
  - Pronunciation
  - Use of numbers
- Fantasy life increased or decreased
- Forgetfulness
- Inattention
- Lack of awareness
- Loss of creativity
- Loss of productivity
- Over attention to details
- Perfectionism
- Preoccupation
- Sense of loved one's presence
- Worrying

### FLARE UPS OF:

- Allergies
- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Canker/cold sores
- Diabetes
- Migraines

This is only a partial listing of common grief reactions.  
There are many additional grief reactions that are not included here.

## Children's Development Stages and Reactions to Death

<i>Ages</i>	<i>Common Developmental Characteristics</i>	<i>Grief Reactions</i>	<i>Helpful Approaches</i>
<b>2 - 5 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Magical, fantastical thinking.</li> <li>▪ Active fantasy life</li> <li>▪ Highly egocentric</li> <li>▪ May blame self for bad things.</li> <li>▪ May not be able to verbalize needs and fears</li> <li>▪ Reversibility of concepts. Need to repeat things</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Confusion. Agitation at night; may be afraid to go to sleep.</li> <li>▪ Child may be able to appreciate a profound event has occurred, but may not understand permanence of death.</li> <li>▪ May seem unaffected.</li> <li>▪ Repeated questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Simple honest words, and phrases.</li> <li>▪ Reassurance.</li> <li>▪ Secure and loving environment</li> <li>▪ Drawing, reading, books, playing together, active play.</li> <li>▪ Support play as form of expression.</li> <li>▪ Include in the funeral rituals</li> </ul>
<b>5 - 8 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Child can think concretely and logically.</li> <li>▪ Ability to use language increases.</li> <li>▪ Increased memory capacity, both long and short term.</li> <li>▪ Increased awareness of feelings and expectations of others.</li> <li>▪ Peers important.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Want to understand death in a concrete way.</li> <li>▪ Denial, anger, sorrow</li> <li>▪ Distress.</li> <li>▪ May act as though nothing has happened.</li> <li>▪ Desire to be like peers.</li> <li>▪ May repeat questions.</li> <li>▪ May need physical activity regularly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Answer questions simply and honestly.</li> <li>▪ Look for confused thinking.</li> <li>▪ Offer physical outlets.</li> <li>▪ Reassurance about the future.</li> <li>▪ Drawing, reading, playing together.</li> <li>▪ Include in funeral rituals.</li> </ul>
<b>8 - 12 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Enjoy games, and competing.</li> <li>▪ Begin to have increased understanding of self and relationship to world.</li> <li>▪ Increased propensity for language.</li> <li>▪ Able to reason through situations using problem solving skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shock, denial, anxiety, distress.</li> <li>▪ Try to cope.</li> <li>▪ Understand finality of death.</li> <li>▪ May have morbid curiosity, or want to know specifics about death and dying.</li> <li>▪ May need regular physical activity.</li> <li>▪ Want to be like peers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Answer questions directly and honestly.</li> <li>▪ Reassurance about the future.</li> <li>▪ Create times to talk about feelings and questions.</li> <li>▪ Offer physical outlets.</li> <li>▪ Reading.</li> <li>▪ Include in funeral plans and rituals.</li> </ul>
<b>12 - 18 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Need independence.</li> <li>▪ Can think abstractly.</li> <li>▪ Puberty usually has begun by now.</li> <li>▪ May have false sense of immortality.</li> <li>▪ Peer group important.</li> <li>▪ May begin to have intimate relationships.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shock, anger, distress.</li> <li>▪ May become depressed or withdraw.</li> <li>▪ May react similar to adult, but have less coping mechanisms.</li> <li>▪ May feel isolated, especially from peers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Allow and encourage expression of feelings.</li> <li>▪ Encourage peer support.</li> <li>▪ Groups may be helpful.</li> <li>▪ Utilize other adults.</li> <li>▪ Maintain consistent environment.</li> <li>▪ Include in funeral plans and rituals.</li> </ul>

## Helpful Suggestions

1. When talking to a child about the death, find out what he/she knows or perceives about what has happened. Children may be aware of more than you think.
2. Answer any questions simply and honestly, but only offer the details that they can absorb.
3. Let them know you will be available to listen. When they are ready to talk—listen.
4. Let the child have time to grieve, be upset and talk about their fears. Validate their feelings and provide reassurance.
5. Give the child different ways of expressing his or her grief—verbal, written, creative, musical and physical.
6. Allowing the child to go outside and play can be a good way to run off the anxiety they may sense from the adults and feel themselves.
7. Try and keep regular routines. Children can grieve a change in behavior and mourn the environment and the predictability of a schedule that existed before the loss or death. Keeping regular routines can help.
8. Be patient and flexible. Children grieve intermittently. They may cry one moment and then play normally the next.
9. Remember that it may take the child to recover from a loss depends on the child, the type of loss and the relationship with the lost person, pet, object, etc. This could be months or years.
10. Validate the reality that although a child will usually recover from a loss in his/her own time, they will always feel some level of the loss especially when triggered by a memory. This is normal and can contribute to healing if the child is supported, validated and loved.
11. Help the child to foster memories of their special person who died. This can help them process their grief and provide comfort in knowing that the memories they have of their special person can never be taken away.

## Explaining Suicide

Suicide is a difficult topic to speak about. It is hard for adults to understand and difficult to explain to children. Children can cope better with difficult topics and feelings when they are able to talk openly about them.

### Some common feelings after a suicide:

- Abandonment
- Feeling the death is their fault
- Afraid they will die too
- Worried someone else they love will die
- Sadness, embarrassment
- Confusion, shock, anger, loneliness, or numbness

### Starting the conversation:

- Find a place where you can talk openly and quietly without interruption.
- You may want to have another adult present to increase your comfort level.
- Tell the truth.
- Talk in a calm, straight forward manner and use age-appropriate language.
- Begin by saying, *Johnny, sit down, I have something I need to tell you.* If there is more than one child, you can tell them together but in a way that the youngest can understand. The older ones can ask more questions later.
- Very young children (3 and under) don't understand the permanence of death. You can say *Daddy has died and I am sad. I will take care of you.*
- When the child is 3-6 years old, you can provide more information. *Daddy has died and I am very sad. That's why you have seen me crying. Dead means the person can't eat, talk or eat. The body has stopped working and cannot be fixed.*
- Provide reassurance. If the child asks how Daddy died, you can say *Daddy died by suicide, which means he killed himself.* The rest of the conversation will depend on the child's response. That may be plenty of information for the moment. Older children will have more direct questions. Here are some possible answers:
  - He had an illness called depression. It's different from having a bad day or cold.
  - I don't know why-I wish I knew.
  - She didn't know how to get help or see any other way to stop the pain.
  - Suicide is complicated. We'll never know exactly what when through his mind or what she was feeling...but he must have been in horrible pain.

## How to talk to your child after a Public Tragedy

- Reassure yourself and your child that an event like this impacts an entire nation. Regardless of where we are in the world we are affected by the events that have taken place.
- Allow yourself and your child/children to be angry and question why horrible things like this happen in the world.
- It is important to reassure your child/children of their safety, provide extra supervision, physical closeness and extra hugs. Let your child know that their family, teachers, police officers and firefighters here to help protect him or her.
- Be patient and available to answer questions honestly and in an age appropriate manner. It is okay if you cannot answer certain questions due to a lack of information or comfort level. I don't know is an acceptable answer!
- Be honest about your feelings. Sharing your feelings and fears with your children gives them a sense of hope and validates their feelings.
- Remain calm! Your ability to manage your fears and emotions will help your child manage their feelings and build healthy coping skills.
- Take a break from the media exposure. Turn off the TV, radio, refrain from using Facebook and Twitter and limit adult conversation.
- Think about a fun activity that you can do as a family to redirect their attention.
- It is in everyone's best interest to return to your normal routine while maintaining open and honest channels of communication with your children.
- Consider how this event might trigger recent deaths or other traumatic events in your life.
- Remember that your child may need to revisit the event and ask the same question repeatedly in an effort to understand their emotions and process the event.
- Provide your child/children with a safe place to share their feelings, discuss nightmares they are having as a result of the tragedy and fears.
- Be patient if your child begins to regress as this is normal.
- Be mindful of the children's developmental grief reactions. A preschool age child will understand death and trauma in very concrete terms in contrast to a teen that is beginning to problem solve and understand the event more abstractly.
- Use religious and cultural resources for support.
- Experiencing grief reactions are normal. Look for changes in eating and sleeping habits, unusual clinginess, avoidance of anything reminiscent of the event, emotional numbing, clumsiness, withdrawal, aggression, fatigue, and insomnia etc. . .
- Ask about the emergency security protocol at your child's school. Share these plans with your child/children to promote a sense of safety in their school.
- The first step to helping your child is helping yourself. Get support for yourself and your children if you need it.



## Helping Children Grieve the Loss of a Pet

**It is important to understand the special relationship between a child and his/her pet:**

- A family pet is a welcome member of any household, a companion and playmate that gives both pleasure and opportunities for learning.
- The love relationship between a child and pet is experienced in many ways.
- Children and teens completely involve themselves with their pets: they take charge of them, hold, feed, clean up after, and claim their pet as their own – “of their world”.
- Pets appear in children’s fantasies and dreams: poems and stories are written about turtles and birds, and children are transported into a fluid, graceful world as they watch their fish swim.
- When a pet dies, parents might be surprised by the intensity of the grief reactions children feel.

**It is helpful for parents to prepare children for grief and loss as a natural part of life by providing age-appropriate education:**

- Teaching death awareness throughout the child’s life.
- Accepting the many aspects of the grieving process when death occurs.
- Some deaths, such as when an animal declines with illness or must be euthanized, may be anticipated and discussed in advance.
- Talk directly to children avoid terms like “put to sleep” that might confuse children or cause anxiety in other parts of their lives.
- Anticipated deaths are full of feelings, regardless of how thoroughly the family is prepared.
- An accidental death is always hard.
- Persistent questioning, guilt, sometimes blame, and “what if’s?” are normal grief reactions.

## Handling the Holidays

The holidays are traditionally a time of joy and coming together with loved ones, but when someone in our life dies, the spirit of the season may not be as bright. For grieving children, the holidays can still be an exciting time of the year and the following tips are ways for you as a family to cope through the holidays.

1. **Remember children grieve differently than adults.** Children are able to separate their grief from the holiday.
2. **Take an active role in helping children cope.** Be tolerant of different behaviors children may display. Children are sometimes not as verbal as adults and need other ways to express their grief.
3. **Plan the holiday instead of letting it happen.** Build flexibility and compromise into your plan. The magic of the holidays is usually more exciting for children. To help maintain some of the magic, it is important they have security and structure during this time.
4. **Decide how your family would like to remember your loved one during the holidays.** You may want to set aside a special time during the day to share memories of your loved one who died.
5. **Give family members choices of how they would like to celebrate the holiday season.** Traditions provide a way for children to express thoughts and feelings. Most children will assume that you'll do the same things. They need to know if things are going to be different. Surprises can be unsettling. If you make a change this year, that doesn't mean it has to be forever.

## **Guidelines for Children and Funerals**

Often adults are unsure of how to deal with the topic of children and funerals. The following are suggestions for helping families make the decision of whether children should attend a funeral or service and how to prepare them for the experience.

### **Should Children Attend?**

1. After the child is given some information about the funeral, wake or service, allow him/her to make the choice about whether or not to attend. However, if the child is given a choice, be prepared to follow through with the child's decision. Sometimes other people (friends / relatives) may voice disagreement with a child attending. Try to be firm in you and your child's decision.
2. If the child chooses not to attend, other ways to say good-bye may be provided, either at this time or at a later date. It is never too late to say good-bye. A personal memorial service, a letter writing activity or another ritual can be done if the child wants.

### **Preparing the Child**

1. Discuss the events of the day step by step, including the service, procession and cemetery.
2. To the best of your ability, discuss the environment (i.e. what the funeral home will look like, smell like, etc.).
3. If the deceased is in a closed casket, explain the reason for this and reinforce that the body is inside even though it can't be seen.
4. If there will be an open casket, discuss what the body will look like; how it will feel (i.e. cool and hard, like a wall); that it will appear to be sleeping and review the differences between sleep and death (i.e. when you are dead you do not breathe and your heart does not beat); that it is OK to touch the body, if they choose.
5. If the body is to be cremated, help the children understand that this is another way to take care of a body after it has died. You may say that a very hot heat quickly turns the body into ashes and that all the cremains or ashes are placed in a special container called an urn.
6. Review what will be expected of the child.
7. Discuss possible feelings that adults and children may experience and how these feeling may look (i.e. sadness and crying).

## Children and Teen Resource List

### General Death and Dying

#### *Appropriate for Preschool and School Age Children*

- Blackburn, L.B. (1991). **I Know I Made It Happen.** Omaha: Centering Corporation.
- Boritzer, E. (2000) **What is Death?** Santa Monica, CA: Veronica Lane Books
- Buscaglia, L. (1982). **The Fall of Freddie the Leaf.** New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Joslin, M. (1998) **The Goodbye Boat.** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans
- Kent, J. (1975). **There's No Such Thing as a Dragon.** Racine: Western
- LeShan, E. (1972). **What Makes Me Feel This Way.** New York: Macmillan.
- Mellonie, B. & Ingpen, R. (1983). **Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children.** New York: Bantam Books.
- Mills, Joyce. (1993). **Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying.** New York: Magination Press.
- Mundy, M. (1998). **Sad Isn't Bad.** St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press
- Rofes, Eric. (Ed.). (1985). **The Kid's Book About Death and Dying.** New York: Little Publishers.
- Simon, N. (1986). **The Saddest Time** Niles: Albert Whitman and Company.
- Simon, N. (1989). **I Am Not a Crybaby.** New York: Penguin Books
- Stein, Sara Bonnet. (1974). **About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together.** New York: Walker and Company.
- Varley, Susan (1984). **Badger's Parting Gifts,** New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books
- Viorst, J. (1972). **Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.** New York: Macmillan

### Death of a Parent

#### *Appropriate for Preschool Children*

- Clifton, L. (1983). **Everett Anderson's Good-bye.** New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Vigna, J. (1991). **Saying Good-bye to Daddy.** Morton Grove: Albert Whitman and Company.

#### *Appropriate for School Age Children*

- Carter, F. (1976). **The Education of Little Tree.** Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Powell, E.S. (1990). **Geranium Morning.** Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books
- Tiffault, E. (1992). **A Quilt For Elizabeth.** Omaha: Centering Corporation.

### Death of a Sibling

#### *Appropriate for Preschool Children*

- Johnson, J. & Jampolsky, G. (Eds.). (1982). **Another Look at the Rainbow.** Berkely: Celestial Arts.
- Romond, J. (1989). **Children Facing Grief: Letters From Bereaved Brothers and Sisters.** St. Meinrad: Abbey Press.

#### *Appropriate for School Age Children*

- Alexander, S. (1983). **Nadia The Willful.** New York: Random House.
- Murray, G. & Jampolsky G. (Eds.) (1982). **Another Look at the Rainbow.** Berkely: Celestial Arts.
- Romond, J. (1989). **Children Facing Grief: Letters From Bereaved Brothers and Sisters.** St. Meinrad: Abbey Press.

### Death of a Friend

#### *School Age Children*

- Clardy, A.F. (1984). **Dusty Was My Friend.** New York: Human sciences Press.
- Cohn, J. (1987). **I Had a Friend Named Peter.** New York: Morrow and Company.
- Jordan, M. (1989). **Losing Uncle Tim.** Niles: Albert Whitman and Company.
- Kaldhol, M. & Oyen, W. (1987). **Good-bye Rune.** Brooklyn: Kane/Miller.
- Smith, D. (1973). **A Taste of Blackberries.** New York: Thomas Crowell.
- Romond, J. (1989). **Children Facing Grief: Letters From Bereaved Brothers and Sisters.** St. Meinrad: Abbey Press

### Death of a Grandparent

#### *Appropriate for Preschool and School Age Children*

- Bosak, V. (1997). **Something to Remember Me By.** Toronto: The Communication Project.
- DePaola, T. (1973). **Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs.** New York: Penguin.

## Resources for Children

Curtis, J. Today I feel Silly

Written by Jamie Lee Curtis and illustrated by Laura Cornell this vibrant book about emotions helps children identify, explore and have fun with their ever-changing moods.

Higginbotham, Anastasia. *Death is Stupid*. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2016

As a child views his grandmother in a casket, he overhears a relative say, "She's in a better place." Furious, he asks, "Would I be in a better place if I died?!" He wants his grandmother back and is freaked out at seeing his father cry.

Karst, P. *The Invisible String*

This children's book written by Patrice Karst shows children that they are always loved. This lesson is suited for a variety of situations, including for families coping with the death of a loved one.

Kransny L. & Brown M. *When Dinosaurs Die*, 1996.

A picture book that explains in simple language the feelings people may have regarding the death of loved ones and ways to honor their memory.

Moundlic, Charlotte. *The Scar*. Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2011

A children's book with humor and captivating illustrations, while a little boy responds to the death of his mother.

Penn, A. *Chester Racoon and The Acorn Full of Memories*.

Many young children must face the loss of loved ones or the need to attend a funeral. This sweet story will help children to understand the positive purpose behind memorial services and how "making memories" can provide cheer and comfort when missing an absent loved one.

Saxton Freymann & Joost Elffers, 1999. *How are you Peeling?*

Children identify different emotions with the expressive faces of fruits and vegetables.