

Supporting a Grieving Child

Explaining death to children:

- Speak honestly and with facts using simple, direct, age-appropriate language.
- Avoid euphemisms, like “went to sleep”. Use concrete terms, like “died” or “dead”. For example: “Your father died of a disease called cancer.”
- Share information in doses. Determine what your child can handle by giving information in small bits at a time, providing more detail as they ask questions or look for clarification. Young children may be repetitive in their questioning. Continue to gently, patiently respond to those as they arise.
- Be comfortable saying, “I don’t know.” Or “I’m not sure about that.” We don’t always have answers after a death. It’s helpful to tell your child that you may not know about certain things, like, “Why did dad have to die?”, or in the case of suicide, “Why did mom take her life?” Not every death is clear and many are left with unanswerable questions.
- Acknowledge and validate any emotional response that surfaces.

Helpful conversation prompts:

- **Sharing the news:** “I have some sad news to tell you. Grandpa died today.”
- **Validating feelings:** “I know you’re feeling very sad and I am sad, too. We both loved Grandpa very much and we will miss him.”
- **Responding to fear of another death:** “Most people live until they are very old. I don’t plan on anything happening to me, but if something does, Aunt Sarah will be here to take care of you.”

Children’s reactions to grief:

Children grieve differently from adults, and their responses are often unique from one child to another. Young children lack an understanding of death or its permanence. Sometimes, they worry they have done something to cause the death, others might not seem too concerned about it, and many can go from crying one moment to wanting to play the next. As children age and begin to have more of an understanding of death, their grief may resurface, even years later. Children rely on parents and other caregivers for support as they process their grief through their developmental stages.

Normal grief reactions include:

- Emotional distress, e.g., crying, guilt, shock, fear
- Anger at the person who died or others around them
- Short-term changes in grades and academic performance
- Lack of concentration/focus for a period of time after death (few weeks)

How to support a grieving child:

- *Be honest with your child.*
- Acknowledge and validate any emotional response that arises.
- Maintain open communication, listen without judgment, and answer questions honestly.
- Maintain consistent rules and boundaries. Children gain security when they have clear expectations. Children may use their grief to excuse inappropriate behavior and while it's important to acknowledge and validate the pain they are experiencing, it's still important to hold them accountable for their actions.
- Be honest with your own emotions. Let them know it's OK to be sad or angry.
- Reassure them that they are not alone and that there are people in their lives that are there to support them as they process their feelings.
- Encourage play and healthy or creative outlets to express their feelings.
- Create rituals and/or new family traditions that help them honor and remember their loved one. Include them in coming up with ideas.

When to seek additional support:

- Significant changes in behavior, acting out, or personality changes
- Academic changes, dropping grades, and attendance issues that don't begin to improve after several weeks
- Self-destructive and high-risk behaviors, such as drug use
- Self-harm or suicidal ideation
- Isolation/Withdrawal
- Depression or apathy
- Any symptoms that significantly interfere with the child's normal functioning after several weeks