

# Understanding Children's Grief



Michael's Place

*let the healing begin*

# *In This Guide*

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# Factors that Impact the Grief Process

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How children or teens grieve after experiencing the death of someone significant in their life will depend on many factors, including:

✓ *Age/Gender*

✓ *Personality*

✓ *Developmental Stage*

✓ *Amount of support around them*

✓ *How they usually react to stress and emotion*

✓ *Relationship with the person who died*

✓ *Family circumstances*

✓ *Earlier experiences of loss or death*

✓ *How others around them are grieving*

# Developmental Stages

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Children's grief is different from that of an adult. But the grief process also varies among children as well. A child or teen's understanding of death, grief reactions, and needs change as children age and go through different developmental stages.

*While each child is unique, their concept of death can be segmented into the following developmental stages:*

- Birth - 2 years old
- 3 - 5 years old
- 5 - 8 years old
- 9 - 12 years old
- Teens





# Birth– 2 Years Old

## Concept of Death:

- No understanding of death.
- Sees it as reversible-not permanent.
- Aware of absence of loved one.
- Notices changes in routine and in the emotions of family.

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## Grief Response

- Misses contact, sounds, smells, and sight of loved one
- May have anxiety and fear of being abandoned
- Looks for the person who died.

## Emotions & Behaviors

- Crying
- Sickliness
- Clinging
- Throwing
- Sucking
- Biting
- Sleeplessness

## Signs of Distress

- Physical changes, including weight loss
- Being quiet and less responsive

## *Tips to Help:*

- Keep routines and activities as consistent as possible
- Physical comfort (hold and cuddle them)
- Speak and behave calmly and gently
- Provide items of comfort (stuffed animal, soft blanket, etc.)



## 3- 5 Years Old

### Concept of Death

- Death is reversible-not permanent.
- To be dead is to be "sleeping" or "away"
- May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies
- Magical thinking and fantasies-often worse than reality

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### Grief Response

- Intense but brief response
- Most aware of changes in routine and care
- Interested in dead things
- May act as if death didn't happen
- Looking for person who died

### Signs of Distress

- Regression
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Bedwetting

### Emotions & Behaviors

- Plays out scene of death, change, and feelings
- Physical complaints
- Sadness/crying
- Irritability/fighting
- Insecurity
- Confusion
- Fear/Worry

### *Tips to Help:*

- Keep routines and activities as consistent as possible
- Provide physical comfort, hugs
- Speak and behave calmly and gently
- Reassure them that they are safe and cared for
- Let them know you are sad and that its ok to be sad
- Encourage play



# 5- 8 Years Old

## *Concept of Death*

- May still see death as reversible at younger age range, but beginning to grasp the concept of finality
- May see death as a punishment
- Think their thoughts or actions caused the death
- Forming spiritual concepts

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## **Grief Response**

- Repetitive questioning
- May focus on process - How? Why?
- Intense responses mixed with acting as if nothing happened

## **Signs of Distress**

- Regression
- Nightmares
- Sleeping and/or eating disturbances
- Violent play

## **Emotions & Behaviors**

- Crying/Sadness
- Anger/Irritability
- Loneliness
- Fear/Anxiety/Guilt
- Withdrawal
- Confusion
- Guilt

## *Tips to Help:*

- Keep routines and activities consistent
- Reassure them- provide physical comfort
- Allow questions and answer honestly
- Speak and behave calmly around them
- Provide opportunities for decision-making
- Encourage play/creative outlets
- Let them know you are sad and it's ok to be sad

# 9-12 Years Old



## Concept of Death

- Understands that death is permanent
- Starting to think about future impact
- Focus on the biology - what happens to the body when you die
- Concerns that their thoughts or actions caused the death
- Forming spiritual concepts

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## Grief Response

- Specific questions and desire for details
- Concerned with how others are responding and how they should
- Talks about the physical aspects of illness or death

## Emotions & Behaviors

- Shock/confusion
- Sadness
- Anger/irritability
- Loneliness/abandonment
- Fear/Anxiety
- Guilt
- Concentration difficulties
- Nightmares and sleep changes

## Signs of Distress

- Regressive behaviors and mood fluctuations
- Aggressive acting out
- Withdraw/Isolation
- Extreme changes in academics/grades
- Suicidal thoughts/Self-harm

## *Tips to Help:*

- Allow questions and answer honestly
- Connect them with another trusted adult when needed
- Provide opportunities for decision-making
- Regular reassurance, both verbally and through physical comfort
- Honest communication/validation of emotions



# Teens



## Concept of Death

- Death is final and universal
- High death awareness (may happen again) and concerns of own impending death
- May utilize spiritual concepts to cope
- Conflict between independence & dependence
- Need to have control of feelings
- Words/actions may have caused the death

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## Grief Response

- Increased risk-taking
- Attempts to take on caregiver role
- More often willing to talk to others outside of family
- Adult approach
- Traditional mourning
- Highly self-conscious about being different from peers due to grief

## Emotions & Behaviors

- Shock/confusion
- Sadness
- Anger/irritability
- Loneliness/Abandonment
- Fear/Anxiety
- Guilt
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares/sleep changes

## Signs of Distress

- Impulsive/risk-taking behaviors
- Drug and alcohol use
- Aggressive acting out/non-compliance
- Extreme changes in academics/grades
- Suicidal thoughts/self-harm
- Isolation/withdrawal/depression

## *Tips to Help:*

- Be honest and encourage open communication
- Be willing to listen and acknowledge emotions
- Connect them with a trusted adult or peer support
- Normalize grief process
- Avoid expectation of adult responsibility
- Let them help plan funeral/memorial services
- Provide opportunities to remember their loved one
- Encourage healthy, creative outlets

# Supporting a Grieving Child

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*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.*



- Be honest with your child
- Acknowledge and validate any emotional response that arises
- Maintain open communication, listen without judgement, 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

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When a child or teen is showing the signs of distress listed within each developmental stage, added support is recommended. If a child/teen is showing any of the signs listed below, it is important to seek out assistance from a medical or mental health professional.

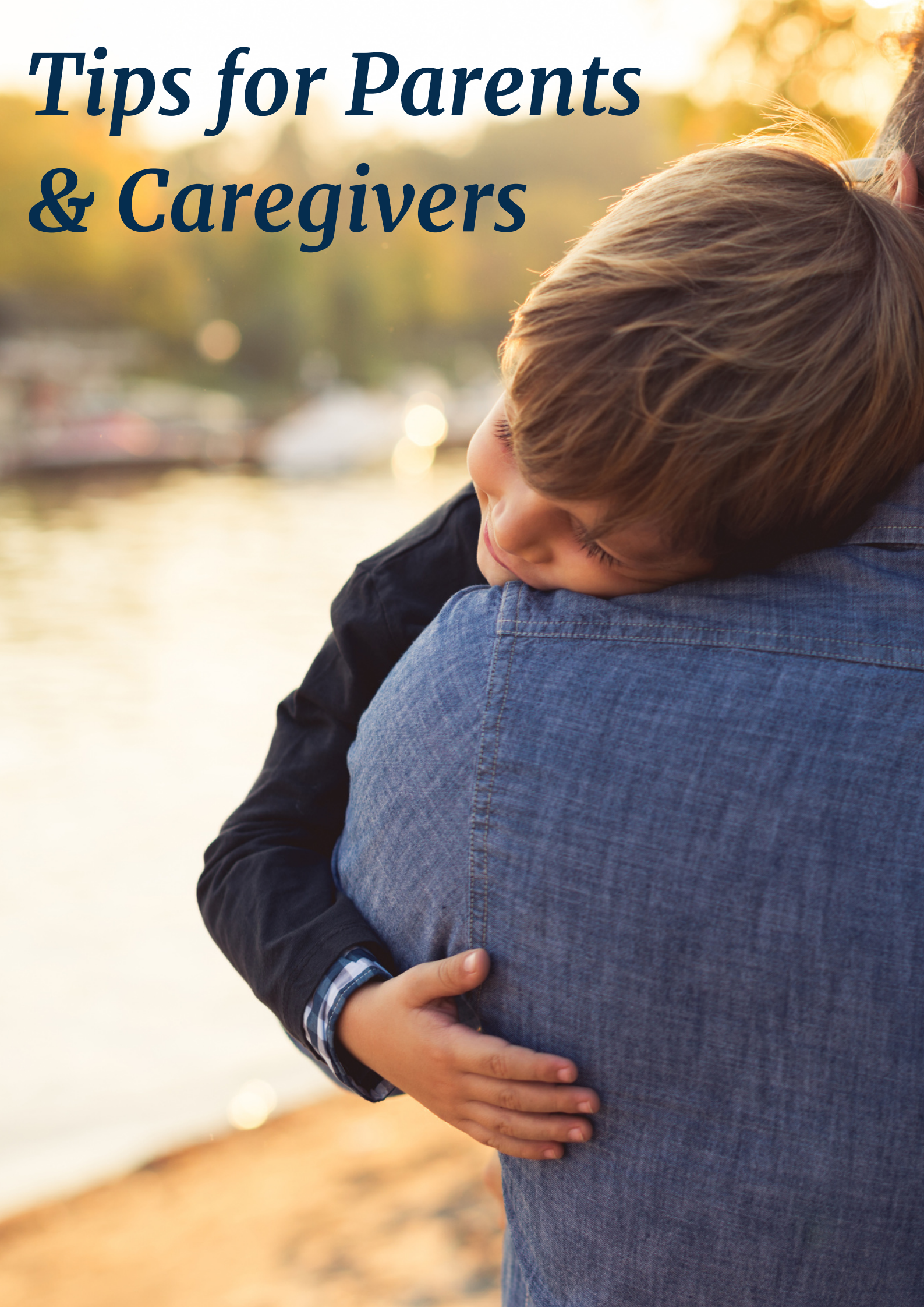
- Significant changes in behavior, acting out, or personality changes
- Academic changes, dropping grades, and attendance issues that don't begin to improve after several weeks
- Self-destructive and high-risk behaviors, such as drug use
- Self-harm or suicidal ideation
- Isolation/Withdrawal
- Depression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



*Need Crisis Support Now?*

*If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org) for free crisis support 24/7.*

# *Tips for Parents & Caregivers*



# *Tips for Parents & Caregivers*

*Many find it difficult to focus on themselves when their children are hurting. What we often fail to recognize is that prioritizing our own needs does not have to come at the cost of supporting our children. In fact, taking care of yourself is essential to providing them with a safe and caring environment.*

## ***Suggestions to Help Prioritize Your Own Health & Wellness***

### **Express Your Emotions**

Finding healthy ways to express your emotions will not only be beneficial for you, but will also allow you to serve as a role model for your children as they learn to navigate their own grief

### **Surround Yourself with a Strong Support System**

Find people to surround yourself with that can offer support in different ways. The “listener” is someone you can call anytime who is able to hear you and empathize with your pain. The “doer” is anyone who is happy to complete any task list that you have; grocery shopping, mowing the lawn, picking up the kids. The “respite providers” are those you can call on for a distraction from the grief. They can make you laugh and would be happy to go out to dinner, a movie, etc. so that you can have a small break.

*\*Parenting Tips Adapted from National Alliance for Children’s Grief  
and [WhatsYourGrief.com/parenting-grieving/](https://www.whatsyourgrief.com/parenting-grieving/)*

# *Tips for Parents & Caregivers*

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## *Suggestions to Help Prioritize Your Own Health & Wellness*

### **Develop a Self-Kindness Plan**

Grief can be experienced in many different ways, and although there is no short-cut to healing, there are things you can do to take care of yourself to help you get through each day. Accepting your feelings, be gentle with yourself, and paying attention to your physical needs can be a start.

What are you going to do to be kind and take care of yourself?

### **Implement Healthy Coping Skills**

This can be done for yourself, but also together as a family.

Find a handful of “tools” to keep in your back pocket that you can pull out in times of need; physical activities, artistic expression (music, paint), comfort items (stuffed animals, pets, blankets), and mindfulness (yoga, prayer, meditation) are a few suggestions.

### **Important Note**

*Your children are watching and learning ways to grieve and cope with grief from you and their surroundings.*

*While it's important for you to share with your child, it's as vital to be sure you are not leaning on them to become your main support. As much as you are able, encourage them to keep being children, and reduce the role of them becoming a co-parent.*

# *About Michael's Place*

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Located in Traverse City, Michigan, Michael's Place serves grieving children, teens, adults and families throughout northern Michigan with innovative and compassionate support programs designed to ease the impact of loss.

Visit our website for a list of our support groups, community events and educational workshops, as well as for further grief information and resources

*Michael's Place*

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## *Additional Grief Resources*

**Children's Grief**

**Awareness Day**

[childrensgriefawarenessday.org](http://childrensgriefawarenessday.org)

**National Alliance for**

**Children's Grief**

[nacg.org](http://nacg.org)

**Coalition to Support Grieving  
Students**

[grievingstudents.org](http://grievingstudents.org)

**National Center for School  
Crisis & Bereavement**

[schoolcrisiscenter.org](http://schoolcrisiscenter.org)

**Eluna Network**

[elunanetwork.org](http://elunanetwork.org)

**What's Your Grief**

[whatsyourgrief.com](http://whatsyourgrief.com)



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*Michael's Place serves the bereavement needs of the greater community through support, advocacy, and education for those grieving a death.*

*Thank You To All Who Support Michael's Place*



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