



Children & Grief

The most important things for a grieving child to know is that it's okay for them to share their feelings and it's natural to feel the way they feel after losing someone they love. Make sure they know they can ask you any questions they have. In your responses, be clear and keep things simple. Be open about what you know—or don't know—and let them know you feel sad, too. Emotional expression is important; do not discourage children from crying. Provide support to them when they need it, and understand they can recover quickly—do not be alarmed if they are upset one minute and get up to play the next.

Common Grief Reactions for Children

- Panic - Wonder if they will die too
- Anger - Feeling the person dying has deserted them, or doctor failed them
- Bodily Distress - Trouble sleeping, no appetite, wetting pants
- Guilt - Feeling they caused the death by something that was said or done
- Withdrawal - Fear of being hurt again so they avoid getting close
- Replacement - Making a fast play for the affections of others as substitutes
- Assuming Mannerisms - Talking or acting like deceased person

Responses to Loss

When children lose something or someone significant, they respond emotionally, physically, and spiritually. These responses are natural for children coping with a loss.

Emotional Responses

- Shock
- Denial
- Disbelief
- Guilt / Self-blame
- Fear
- Loneliness
- Emptiness
- Sadness
- Nightmares
- Panic
- Relief
- Powerlessness
- Anger
- Hopelessness
- Shame

Psychological Responses

- Inability to concentrate
- Explosive emotions
- Low self-esteem
- Unwilling to discuss loss
- Lack of interest in school or activities
- Withdraw from family and friends
- Change in perception of role in family
- Desire to be alone

Physical Responses

- Tiredness / Lack of energy
- Difficulty sleeping / Oversleeping
- Lack of appetite / Overeating
- Tightness in chest
- Shortness of breath
- Headaches
- Stomach pain
- Nervousness / Trembling
- Lump in the throat

Spiritual Responses

- Anger with higher power
- Search for meaning in the loss
- Belief that person is free from suffering/in a better place/reunited
- Questions about meaning of life
- Interest in afterlife

How Adults Can Help

- **Take care of yourself.** Find support to overcome personal fears and anxieties. Children model behavior and coping skills from adults around them.
- **Maintain structure.** Disruptions in routine can breed insecurity in children, often resulting in hyperactivity and behavioral problems.
- **Avoid unnecessary changes.** Each change adds additional stress. Try to maintain as normal a routine as possible even though it is difficult.
- **Explain the crisis** and how it will be handled with basic honest facts. A child's fantasy can often be more traumatic than reality.
- **Don't ignore a child's fears** and force them into situations. You should also avoid overprotecting them with pity as this can make them feel helpless.
- **Share your own feelings.** This helps children identify and label their own. Emphasize that all feelings are normal. Help children learn healthy ways to express themselves through movement, play, music, and art. This reinforces positive ways to express negative feelings and cope appropriately.
- **Encourage communication.** Don't assume lack of questions means lack of interest. Be available to observe, listen, and talk to detect misconceptions. Expect more separation anxiety.
- **Expect behavioral regression and prepare with support.** Learn what services and resources are available for your situation and needs through churches, schools, libraries, hospitals, community agencies, and counseling.
- **Reassure children.** They need to be reminded that nothing they did or didn't do caused the problem. Find time to give extra love and comfort.

Do's & Don'ts

- Explain what children should expect during a wake, funeral, or memorial service. Give them opportunities to share as much or as little as they want in the rituals, but have someone on hand to bring them home should it become too much.
- Answer every question a child presents, even if you tell them, “I don’t know.” If the question seems grotesque, it’s important the child is not left to make assumptions on their own.
- Pay attention to actions and feelings. Children can’t always phrase their questions about death in words. It is common for them to process their grief through movement.
- Explain the physical changes bought upon by death. Put special emphasis on the fact that the dead stop breathing—something no child can do for very long. You can also use a technique by Harriet Sarnoff Schiff to demonstrate the dead can’t feel pain: pull a strand out of your head, it hurts because the root is still alive. The hair itself is dead, so if you bend it in the middle it doesn’t hurt at all.
- Speak about heaven as a new way of being, not a place. People come back from places—they do not return from heaven.
- Be careful when saying God or Jesus “took someone.” A faithful adult may find comfort in believing divine mercy put an end to suffering, but a child is more vulnerable. You don’t want your child to be afraid that god might snatch away important people in their life.
- Never tell a child not to cry or be sad. Children grieve too. Crying is a natural response that can help to soothe many emotional reactions to grief.
- Avoid presenting death as a blessing, a relief, or a good thing. You may feel this is true, but it can be hard for children to understand without an explanation.
- Using phrases like “You’re the man of the house now,” or “you need to help take care of your siblings now” can place undue burden and pressure on children amidst their grief. This message of replacing the deceased is also inaccurate; human beings are unique and irreplaceable.
- Equating death and sleep is common and, unfortunately, problematic. Often, children don’t fully understand the connection being drawn and instead struggle at bedtime, afraid that they will die while sleeping.

When to Seek Professional Help

Even with attentive loved ones, children sometimes need help from a professional counselor to process their grief. Because children tend to demonstrate their emotions through actions and behaviors, a creative arts therapy may be helpful. The signs listed below are common in grieving children; the most important thing is to notice when these signs seem to be present most of the time and for a prolonged period.

- The child is experiencing prolonged negative thinking or lack of interest about the future.
- There has been a noticeable change in grades and school performance.
- The child is not as socially active as they once were, or spends longer periods of time by themselves.
- The child has frequent headaches and/or other physical complaints.
- They demonstrate a general lack of interest in life, or express feeling numb.
- The child has frequent nightmares or sleep disturbances.
- They are experiencing frequent or prolonged temper tantrums.
- The child cries excessively and for prolonged periods of time without the ability to self-soothe.
- They show increased anxiety regarding separation from, and safety of, loved ones.

Adapted from: Kroen, W.C. (1996). "Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One." Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email griefsupport@palliativecare.org
for more information, resource and support.*