

Children's Grief

Talking to your child about death

One of the hardest tasks after the death of a loved one is talking about and explaining the death to your child or children. It is even harder when you are in the midst of your own grief. This handout offers some ways to help you and your child cope together.

What can I expect from my child as they grieve?

Some common feelings

- **Fear:** Your child may wonder who will take care of them now. They might be scared that some other person they love will die, or that they will die. They may cling to parents or caregivers. Your child might ask you or other people who are important in their life whether or not you love them.
 - **Anger:** Your child may be angry at the person who died because they feel that they have been left alone, or that God did not make the person well.
 - **Sadness:** Your child may be sad or less interested in the things they usually like to do. They may seem to be much more quiet than usual.
 - **Guilt:** Your child may think that they caused the death. They might think that the death happened because they were bad or because they were angry with the person. They may feel responsible for not having been better in some way.
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Some common behaviors

- Your child may have a physical response to death with issues like headaches, stomach aches and feeling tired.
- Your child may go back to behaviors they had outgrown before the death, like wetting the bed or sucking their thumb.
- Your child may experience shock and not believe the death happened and may act like it did not. This is usually because the thoughts of death and separation are too overwhelming.
- If you have a young child, they may not talk about their feelings about the death. It might look like they are not affected by it. Your child may have overwhelming feelings they do not have words for. It is more common for them to express their feelings through the way they act or the way they play.
- It may take some time for your child to show their grieving process to you. If your child continues to do things that are unlike them for more than 6 months after the death, you may want to ask for advice from people who know your child, like their teacher, pediatrician, clergy or a trained mental health provider.

To Learn More

- Journey Program
206-987-2062
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

How can I help my child cope with death?

Include your child in grief activities

- Many adults have trouble dealing with death. Because of this, they assume that children cannot cope with it well, either. They may try to protect children by leaving them out of rituals or not talking to them about the death. When this happens, children may feel anxious, confused and alone. They may be left on their own to find answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and guidance of those around them.
- Your child may want to be a part of the family rituals. Explain these to your child and include your child in deciding how to participate. Make sure they know what to expect and have a supportive adult with them.

Be truthful

- Encourage your child to talk about their feelings. Share how you feel with your child. It may be helpful to cry. You are a model for how to show feelings.
- You can help prepare your child to deal with losing people who are important to them by helping them handle smaller losses. This might mean asking them about their feelings when a pet dies, or talking about a death that happens in a story or on TV.

Be loving

- Whether or not they express themselves, children do grieve, often very deeply. Children who are too young to talk about death need love from the important people in their lives when a person dies. This helps them feel safe and secure.
- Show your child love, and make sure that they know that the people close to them will keep giving love and taking care of them.
- Another way to show love is to be a good listener. You do not have to fix their feelings. Children need their feelings heard.
- Do not force your child to do anything they do not feel comfortable doing.
- Provide opportunities for your child to show their own love for you. Love is both receiving and giving.

Be patient and consistent

- Maintain usual routines as much as possible.
- Your child may have many questions and might need to ask them over and over again. Be patient and give consistent answers to these repetitive questions. Give honest, simple answers that are easy to understand.
- Reassure your child about the cause of the death and explain that any thoughts they had about the person who died did not cause the death.
- Reassure your child that the death does not mean that they or someone else they love is likely to die soon.

Be accepting

- Respect your child's individuality. Find a way to lessen your expectations of your child.
- Avoid telling your child how they should or should not feel.

A common response to grief is to go back to an earlier stage of development. Your child may need to go back into diapers or have a bottle for a while. Support your child in this and keep in mind that these changes are temporary.

Answers to avoid giving your child

Sometimes adults explain death to children in a simple but dishonest way. Unfortunately, this can only make children feel more fearful and unsure. Children tend to be very literal, and they can understand things in a very different way than adults mean. Below are some common answers that adults give to children that are less helpful and sometimes harmful. It is best to avoid these when talking to your child about death:

- “Grandpa will sleep in peace forever.” This explanation may cause your child to fear going to bed or to sleep.
- “Daddy went away on a long trip and won’t be back for a long time.” Your child may wonder why the person left without saying good-bye. Eventually they will realize that the person who died is not coming back and may feel that they did something to cause the person to leave.
- “It is God’s will.” Your child may not understand this concept. They might think that God took the person because they were so good, and they may decide to be bad so God will not take them away, too.
- “John was sick and went to the hospital where he died.” Your child might need to learn more about the difference between “little” and “big” sicknesses. Otherwise, they may be very fearful if they or someone they love has to go to the hospital in the future.

Resources

Dougy.org [The Dougy Center]

Provides a safe place where children, teens, young adults and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

Guiding Your Child Through Grief

Mary Ann and Jame Emswiler, 2000.

Give your child the help and support needed to cope with grief and loss.

Healing a Child’s Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers

Alan Wolfelt, 2001

This series teaches that the most important thing a person can do is listen, have compassion, be there for support, and do something helpful.

Talking About Death, A Dialogue Between Parent and Child

Earl Grollman, 2011

This book is a compassionate guide for adults and children to read together.