

How can I help my children with their grief?

Children view death and feel grief in different ways as they grow and develop. This booklet suggests ways to help children at different stages. However, each child is unique. We encourage you to read all of the information to find ways to help your child.

Helping your children with their grief

Coping with the loss of a loved one is very hard for parents and children. Most children will be OK if they get the support they need. But it isn't easy to find the energy to help your children when you are grieving too. This is normal.

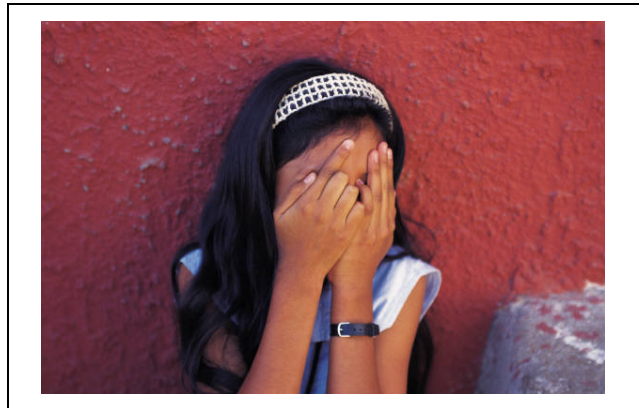


Understanding grief

- Grief is a natural feeling when someone you love has died.
 - Grief is not a feeling to be ashamed of or hide.
 - There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
 - Children have different ways of showing grief than adults.
 - With support, children can heal and recover.
 - The healing process may take a long time.
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Talking to your children

- Tell your children about the death as soon as possible. It is best for your children to hear this from you or someone they trust.
- Keep your explanations simple. Use words that they can understand. It is best to use the word “dead”. Children may be confused or frightened if you say the person was lost, went to sleep or was taken away.
- Share your feelings and beliefs about death. This can help your children express their own feelings.
- Reassure your children that all their feelings are normal. It’s OK to feel sadness, anger or guilt. They shouldn’t be frightened of these feelings.
- Let them know it’s alright to cry. Tears are a natural reaction to loss. Let them know that the hurt they feel won’t last forever.



- Don’t push your children to talk about the death. Give them time to take in information and sort out their feelings. When they are ready to talk, try to understand what they are feeling and what they need.
- Let your children know that it’s OK to ask questions. Answer their questions as they come up. They may wonder “Will this happen to me? Did I cause this to happen? Who will take care of me now?” Keep your answers simple and truthful.

- Don't worry if you don't have all the answers. When they ask "Why?" or "Where are they now?", it's OK to say "I don't know". Just responding to your children shows that you care.
- Children may ask the same questions again and again. It's not that they can't understand the answers, but rather the information is so hard to believe and accept. Repeating answers can help them adjust to the loss.



Children's reactions to grief

Each child feels loss and expresses grief in his or her own way.

Your children may cry more easily and more often. They may have mood changes and mixed emotions. There can be physical effects too.

Children's reactions to grief (continued)

All of these reactions are normal.

Emotions	Physical effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• sadness• anxiety• anger• guilt• fear• confusion• lack of feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• loss of appetite• upset stomach• stomach ache• headaches• trouble sleeping



Grief at different ages

Young children (under 3)

- Will sense that something has changed and feel less secure. They may be more “clingy” or afraid of being separated from you.
- May be more grumpy. Their eating and sleeping habits may change. These changes don't usually last long.
- About 2 years of age, children start to understand endings and what “no more” means.

How you can help

- Keep routine the same as much as possible (bedtime, toys, meals, caregivers).
- Comfort with soothing words, hugs, attention or things like a favorite toy or blanket.
- Get help to take care of them from friends and family, if needed. Let them know who will take care of them.



Preschool age children (3 to 5)

- Don't have a clear understanding of death. They may think of death as a monster or ghost. They may ask when the loved one is coming back.
- Do not always show sadness or cry. They may want to play, which helps them with their feelings. They may have short times when they feel sad, angry or afraid.
- May have trouble eating, sleeping or going to the bathroom. They may have stomach aches or headaches. They may start to do things they had stopped doing, like thumb sucking, bedwetting, 'clinging' to adults, or having temper tantrums. They may feel afraid and have nightmares. These are normal reactions for children under stress.
- Don't understand that death is permanent. They may ask questions about the deceased that shock you, such as "How does he eat?" or "Does she need her glasses?"

- May tell everyone, even strangers, about the death. This may help them to understand what has happened and how they should feel.
- They may think that they made the death happen because at some time they were mad at the loved one.

How you can help

- Keep routines consistent (meals, bedtime, caregivers).
- Answer questions simply and honestly. Explain that death is not like sleeping. You may need to repeat information many times.
- Reassure them that they it was not their fault, they did not cause the death, and they cannot make the person come back to life again.
- Be patient when your child acts like a much younger child.
- Tell your children that you love them and will take care of them. Hold them and play with them often.



School age children (6 to 10)

- Are starting to understand what “dead” means, but may think it only happens to other people.
- May ask questions which may shock you, such as what happens to the body in the ground or about what it is like to be dead.
- May not get along with siblings or other children.
- May get headaches or stomach aches.
- May not be able to concentrate and do their school work.
- May be angry and want to blame someone for the death.

How you can help

- Keep routines as consistent as possible (meals, after-school care, extra-curricula activities, homework, visits with friends, bedtime).
- Tell them it’s normal for the hurt to come and go.
- Help your child know what to say when other children ask them questions. Your child can just say “ _____ died”. If the children continue to ask questions and this bothers your child, then your child can just say they don’t want to talk about it.
- Talk to your child’s teachers and let them know about the death. Ask them to let you know if your child has any problems at school.
- Make time each day to talk with your child.
- Help your child find a way to keep memories. He or she may want to make a memory box or scrapbook.

Preteens (10 to 13)

- Understand that death is final and that everyone dies.
- May try to hide their feelings.
- May not be able to concentrate and do their school work.
- May start to act out and get in trouble at school.

How you can help

- Spend time with your children. They may talk more about their feelings when they are busy doing something else with you, like shopping or playing a game.
- Help them to understand “saying goodbye” to the deceased is very important. There are many ways to say goodbye, some without words. Help each child find the way that’s best for him/her. Reading a book about grief (written for your child’s age group) may help.
- Keep them busy, if possible, with physical activities.



Help them to talk by sharing your feelings and asking questions about how they are feeling. Let them know that all their feelings are OK.

Teens (14 to 18)

- May talk to other people about their feelings and not to you. This is OK because they are just making choices about who can help them. They may not want to hurt you with what they are feeling.
- May withdraw from their usual activities and friendships.
- May not be able to concentrate and do their school work.
- May struggle to understand the meaning of life. May look for ways to numb the pain of grief by using drugs or alcohol. May have thoughts of suicide.
- May try to be like the person who died.
- May feel they need to take care of you.



How you can help

- Try to keep routines as consistent as possible. Don't overprotect your child. Be prepared to set reasonable limits on behaviour.
- Ask if your teen would like help to find support from others (online or in a group).
- Even though they are grown up in many ways, teens still need you to be in charge. Let them take on some new responsibilities, like household chores, but make sure they don't start to act too much like the person who died.

- Allow them to grieve and think about their own needs (not what they need to do for you). Don't tell them they have to be grown up and strong for others.
- Watch for signs of depression like not doing the things they used to, showing no emotions, changes in eating or sleeping, or even talking about death all the time.
- If you think your teen is depressed or having thoughts of suicide, get help immediately.



Encourage your teen to talk about their feelings with you or someone close to them, or write a journal.

How long does grief last?

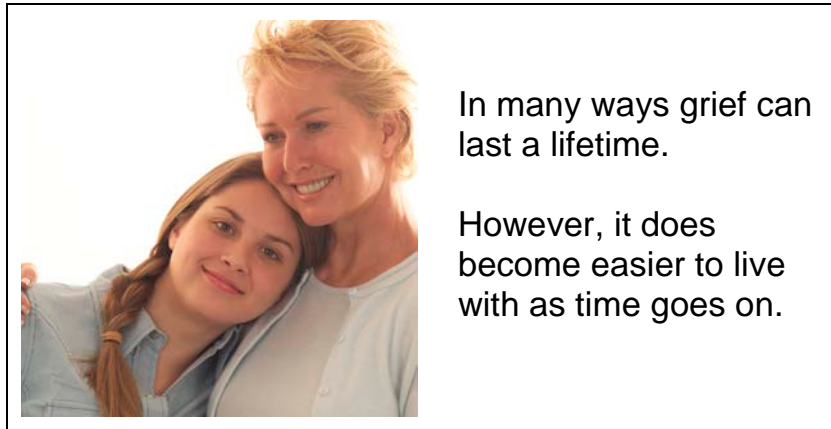
Your children, like you, never “get over” their grief, but they can adjust.

Children have adjusted to the death when:

- They know that the death is final and that the person is not coming back.
- They are doing things pretty much like they used to or in a way that seems normal for their age.

Remember that on special occasions like birthdays, holidays and anniversaries, everyone will feel sad again, even years after the death. This is normal.

When there are other major changes, like changing schools, moving or losing a friend, children feel many of the things they felt at the time of the death.



Where can I get more information or help?

There are many people that can help you and your family such as:

- a social worker
- a child life specialist
- your doctor
- a public health nurse
- a bereavement counsellor
- a teacher or school guidance counsellor
- support groups

There are many books about children's grief. Visit the public library or an online bookstore.

Here are some websites that you may find helpful.

- Parentbooks www.parentbooks.ca Click on 'Children's room'
- Beyond Indigo www.beyondindigo.com/children
- Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk
- The Miscarriage Association www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk
See information leaflet "Talking to children about pregnancy loss"
- Bereaved Families of Ontario www.bereavedfamilies.net
905-318-0070

Notes
