



# **Grief & Loss Resources for Parents/Caregivers**



## **Supporting Kids Through Grief/Loss**

### ***What to say and how to say it***

There's no perfect time to share the news so children should be told as soon as possible, within reason. The main consideration is that you don't want your child hearing the news unexpectedly from some other source or walking into a situation where there are a bunch of adults standing around crying or in shock, which could be very scary for him. Be thoughtful about where to have the conversation. You want to tell your child about the death somewhere where he can feel free to have whatever reaction he is going to have, and that is probably not going to be a public place. You might have the impulse to lessen the blow by sharing the news in a happy location, like a favorite ice cream parlor, but know that a treat won't make the news any less sad or difficult for the child. Try to use direct language and be prepared to give a brief explanation of how or why the death occurred because children will be curious. You don't have to go into a lot of detail, however. With kids you want to start with the minimum amount of information and then add more based on the questions they ask. As long as it's done in a calm and compassionate way, it is best to keep explanations shorter, simpler and more direct.

### ***Guidelines to keep in mind***

The words you choose will vary depending upon the child's age and developmental stage, but experts agree that no matter what the age of the child there are certain guidelines you should stick to:

- Follow their lead. The kinds of questions and concerns that children have can be very different from those of adults. Giving children too much information can overwhelm them. It is better to let them ask questions and then answer in the best (and most developmentally appropriate) way you can. Don't be surprised if young children are mostly concerned about themselves. That is simply how young children are.
- Encourage children to express their feelings. Do not try to "protect" or "shelter" children by attempting to hide your own sadness. They will invariably know that something is wrong, but will be left feeling alone and confused. Hiding your own grief can also make children feel like the sadness they may be feeling is bad. However, try not to let children see you at your most upset moments, as they may begin to worry about you or feel insecure.
- Don't use euphemisms. Avoid phrases like "passed away," "gone," "we lost him." Kids tend to be very literal, and this kind of fuzzy language leaves them anxious, scared and often confused. Or conversely, it may lead them to believe the deceased will come back and that death is not permanent.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible. Grief takes time but children benefit from the security of regular routines and knowing that life goes on.
- Memorialize the person who died. Remembering is part of grieving and part of healing. This can be as simple as sharing memories of the person who died or bringing up the name of the person



who died so that your child knows it's not taboo to talk about and remember that person. It is important to keep photos around, too.

*To help kids ages 2-5 cope with the death of a loved one:*

- **Speak to them at their level.** Use similar experiences to help children understand, such as the death of a pet or changes in flowers in the garden.
- **Provide simple explanations.** For example, "When someone dies, we can't see them anymore but we can still look at them in pictures and remember them."
- **Reassure your children/students.** They might feel what happened is their fault, somehow; let them know it is not.
- **Expect repeated questions.** That is how young children process information

*To help kids ages 6-11 cope with the death of a loved one:*

- **Find out what your child/student is thinking.** Ask questions before you make assumptions about what your child wants to know. For example, you can say, "What's been different for you since \_\_\_\_\_ died? What feelings have you been having? All of this is really hard to think about, but it's important for us to talk about it."
- **Use real words.** Avoid confusing sayings like, "They went to a better place." School-age children are easily confused by vague answers. Instead, you can say, "\_\_\_\_\_ has died, she is not coming back, and it is okay to feel sad about that."
- **Be as concrete as possible.** Use simple drawings to describe things such as the body and injuries.
- **Inform your child.** Let them know that anger and sadness are typical, and that if they avoid feelings she may feel worse later on.
- **Prepare the child for anticipated changes in routines.** Talk about what the changes will mean for them.
- **Reassure them.** Help them understand it is okay, and normal, to have trouble with school, peers and family during this time.
- **Encourage meaningful memorializing.** Help them memorialize. The child might also want to write a letter to the deceased person or draw a picture you can hang up.
- **Be patient.** Kids up to age 11 may think death is reversible, and can have trouble accepting the fact that the person may not return. You might need to say repeatedly, "They died and are not coming back, and I am sad about that."

*How to help kids ages 12-18 cope with the death of a loved one:*

- **Be patient.** Give them openings to talk, but don't push them.
- **Be very open.** Discuss the ways you feel the death may be influencing their behavior.
- **Be flexible.** It is okay, at this time, to have a little more flexibility with rules and expectations.
- **Memorialize meaningfully.** Help them identify means of memorializing this person.

[Guide derived from Child Mind Institute's Helping Children Cope With Grief](#)



### **Children's Books on Death, Loss and Grief**

- Old Hu-Hu. by Kyle Mewburn (ages 3 and up)
- The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr (ages 3 and up)
- If All the World Were... by Joseph Coelho (ages 4-10)
- The Memory Box: A Book About Grief by Joanna Rowland (ages 4 and up)
- About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together by Sara Bonnett Stein (ages 4 and up)
- Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs (English and Spanish) by Tomie dePaola (ages 4-10)
- Someone Special Died by Joan Singleton Prestine (ages 4-10)
- The Dead Bird by Margaret Wise Brown & Remy Charlap (ages 4-10)
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasney Brown & Marc Brown (ages 4-10)
- Everett Anderson's Goodbye by Lucille Clifton (ages 5-10)
- Death is Stupid by Anastasia Higginbotham (ages 6-10)
- When Someone Very Special Dies (Drawing Out Feelings Series) by Margie Heegaard (ages 8-11)
- Taste of Blackberries by Doris Buchanan Smith (ages 9 and up)
- Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson (ages 10 and up)
- Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping With the Loss of a Parent, by Donna Pincus, for ages 5 and up
- I Miss You: A First Look at Death, by Pat Thomas, for ages 4 and up
- Good Answers to Tough Questions About Death, by Joy Berry, for ages 6-12
- A Complete Book About Death for Kids, by Earl Grollman, for all ages
- Everett Anderson's Goodbye, by Lucille Clifton, for ages 5-8, about a father's death
- My Grandson Lew, by Charlotte Zolotow, for ages 5 and up, about a grandparent's death
- When Something Terrible Happens, by Marge Heegaard, for ages 8 and up
- Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies, by Janis Silverman, for ages 8 and up
- Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, by Bryan Mellonie, for all ages
- The Fall of Freddie the Leaf, by Leo Buscaglia, for all ages
- The Next Place, by Warren Hanson, for all ages



## Supporting Those Who Are Grieving

### Things to consider:

- Instead of offering advice, try holding space for their feelings
- Stay in a place of curiosity; everyone's grieving process looks different
- Try to stay focused on their experience (rather than trying to connect by offering your own experience or the experience of someone else you know)
- Try to avoid suggesting there's a timetable for grief (i.e. "It will get better")

<u>Instead of:</u>	<u>Try:</u>
"It will get better."	"I'm so sorry."
"It's important to stay busy and productive."	"Let me know if there's anything I can do to support you."
"This will make you stronger."	"I'm thinking about you and am right here if you need me."
"They wouldn't want you to be sad."	Stay curious about their experience by asking, "How are you doing today?" or "Would you like to talk about it?"



## **Other Grief and Loss Resources**

### **Mental Health Services and Agencies (including individual and group therapy support)**

- [NYC Center for Bereavement](#)
- [Life and Loss Mental Health Counseling](#)
- [COPE Foundation](#) (including ongoing support groups for children, adolescents and adults as well as grief-focussed meditation practices)
- [Brooklyn Bereavement](#)

### **Online resources for parents/caregivers**

- [Modern Loss](#)
- [Soaring Spirits](#)
- [What's Your Grief](#)

### **Podcasts & online communities**

- [Grief Out Loud](#)
- [The Widowed Parent Podcast](#)
- [Coming Back](#)
- [Terrible, Thanks for Asking](#)

### **Online resources for children & teens**

- [10 Ways to Help a Grieving Child](#)
- [How to Be A Hero to Your Grieving Child](#)
- [When Someone Dies: A Child-Caregiver Workbook](#)