

Supporting Grieving Children and Teens



Children and teens, like adults, grieve in their own unique ways when a special person is dying or dies.

The most significant factor in how children and teens grieve is how the adults in their lives respond to the dying process or the death. Love, honesty and support are key to helping a grieving child or teen.

This booklet offers:

- *Insight into what children and teens understand about death and grief*
- *Specific information on how to help your children cope with the dying process or death of a loved one*
- *Information on how to be most effective when having emotional conversations*

Openly expressing your feelings provides your children permission to grieve and guides them in how to grieve in a healthy and meaningful way. If you are struggling with allowing yourself to grieve, you may confuse your children, limit their ability to grieve and, most importantly, to heal. If you are overwhelmed by your grief, ask other family members or close friends for support with your children.

A child's expression and understanding of grief varies depending on his or her development. Generally, children understand much more about the dying process and death than adults realize. However, they may have difficulty expressing their feelings or accepting the finality of death.

Children often have many questions when someone dies. Adults need to try to answer these questions or offer to explore answering them together. Children need to be told the truth in simple, specific terms, no matter who is dying or has died—a parent, sibling, grandparent, relative or friend. What is important for children when someone special dies, is consistency, honesty, clear information about what is going on and permission to be involved or ask questions.

Help your children to understand grief is an ongoing part of life. Encourage them to express their needs and feelings through words, art, writing or play rather than by acting out. Acknowledge their feelings. Helping your children process their feelings will help reduce their anxiety.

Grieving is a life-long process and will feel differently over time, especially during milestones in your child's or teen's life. Encourage your children to share memories of your loved one and to describe specific feelings and thoughts they are experiencing. In keeping an open dialogue with your children, you are helping them heal and grow through their grief.

We hope the information you find in the pages ahead provides comfort and guidance to you and those you love on their grief journey. We are here to support you. Please call us at 952-993-6087 with questions or concerns or let us know how we can help.

*Our caring thoughts are with you,
Park Nicollet Methodist Hospital Hospice*

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How Children Understand and React to Death

A child's ability to understand the full meaning of death depends in part on his or her age, language skills and knowledge. Individual coping styles, as well as personal and cultural family experiences, also affect a young person's understanding of death. On the following pages, developmental guidelines describe how children of different ages generally view death.

Each section also lists common grief reactions of children in the age group. Children have a wide range of grief reactions when a loved one is dying or has died. Reactions may be physical, emotional, social or mental.

Some children and teens may show warning signs of significant distress. These signs can be cries for help about deeper concerns they cannot express directly.

Spending special time alone with a parent, guardian, close relative or adult friend can be helpful. A child also may need evaluation and help at school or with a counselor to identify the specific cause of the distress.

Many of the same guidelines help support children of any age grieve (see "Ways to Help a Grieving Child" on Page 18). But it also is important to understand specific ways to help children at certain ages.

*Just when I
really, really start
missing my sister
and feeling like
life won't ever
be better, the
sun rises and I
remember that
it will.*

~ Max, age 10

Infants to 3 Years Old

What they know

Infants and very young toddlers do not understand death but can experience it as a separation. They depend on nonverbal communication for care, affection and reassurance. They easily sense and react to the mood of those around them.

How they feel

Babies and young toddlers who experience the death (separation) of a parent or caregiver with whom they have bonded might notice that person is missing. They often become more irritable and cry more than usual.

They also can become detached and disinterested in what is going on around them.

Changes in eating and sleeping patterns also may occur.

How to help

- Soothe your infant or toddler with physical contact. Pick up, gently rock or hold your baby when he or she is crying. Give gentle massages. Talk, smile and sing to your baby.
- Minimize changes in routine and setting as much as possible.
- Ask for help from other nurturing adults you trust to help with caring for your infant for the days and weeks following the death.

3 to 6 Years Old

What they know

Very young children begin to recognize death as something special but do not fully understand what death is or that it is permanent. Children this age often believe people who die will come back or confuse death with sleeping or being away.

They may ask questions repeatedly. They need to talk about the death a lot, often at what seems an inappropriate time. The repetition helps make it real.

Magical thinking is common at this age. A child believes he or she—or someone else, such as the other parent or the doctor—somehow caused (because of a wish or bad thought or deed) a loved one to die. The child may think he or she might “catch the same thing.”

How they feel

Very young children lack words to express their grief. Some children continue to participate in regular play activities. They do not seem to be affected by a loved one’s death. The playing helps to relieve the reality of the loss. Other children may act out their feelings in the play or in everyday behavior.

Children this age may get anxious at times of separation, have nightmares or resume younger behaviors. For example, start to suck a thumb, wet the bed, throw tantrums or be afraid of the dark.

How to help

- Explain what death means using simple direct language your child can understand. Use proper words, such as "died," "dead," "cancer" or "does not eat, have a heartbeat, grow or move." Also see "Words to Use When Talking about Death and Funerals" on Page 21.
- Do not use phrases such as: "We lost him." "She passed away." "He is sleeping." "Taken from us." These statements convey mixed messages and can be confusing. Children may be afraid to go to sleep.
- Reassure your child he or she did not say or do anything to cause the death.
- Reassure your child you will take care of him or her.

6 to 9 Years Old

What they know

Young school-age children begin to understand that death is final. Often children this age do not accept that everyone will die at some point, least of all himself or herself.

They continue to have magical thinking (see Page 6) and relate death with some wrongdoing. They also may personify (visualize) death as a boogey man or a skeleton.

Children this age worry other people they love may die. To deal with what they are thinking and feeling and to understand the facts regarding death, they ask questions. However, they also may be reluctant to talk about death.

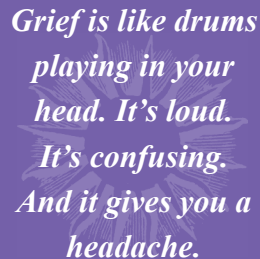
How they feel

Young school-age children still lack words to express their grief. Instead, they often demonstrate strong feelings of grief and loss through anger and fighting.

Anxiety can be high. Children this age often cry and protest about doing activities. Completing school homework may be a problem. Daydreaming and withdrawal from other people is common.

Children this age may resume behavior typical of a younger child. For example, they may start using baby talk or stop tying their own shoes.

They also may experience changes in sleeping and eating patterns.



*Grief is like drums
playing in your
head. It's loud.
It's confusing.
And it gives you a
headache.*

—Alyssa, age 7

How to help

- Define the word *dead*. Use proper words, such as “cancer,” “died” or “does not eat, have a heartbeat, grow or move” to explain what death means. (Also see “Words to Use When Talking about Death and Funerals” on Page 21.)
- Do not make confusing statements, such as “We lost him.” “She passed away.” “He is sleeping.”
- Assure your child that he or she did not say or do anything to cause the death and that death is not contagious.
- Reinforce the fact that everyone dies.
- Respond compassionately to your child’s behavior without judgment. Let your child express his or her feelings and emotions. Create a safe place your child can go if needed.
- Allow some flexibility in routines and time for physical or creative activities, such as sports, walks, games, music, art or dancing.
- Talk with teachers about homework responsibilities or find a classmate who can work with your child to provide some support.
- Give choices whenever possible.

9 to 12 Years Old

What they know

Children this age understand the finality of death. They also begin to have a sense of their own mortality.

They are curious about physical facts of death and often form various theories about or reasons for a loved one's death. Some children this age still think death is a punishment for something they or someone else did wrong. They also worry others they love may die.

How they feel

Preteens have words to express their grief. They often need encouragement to express their feelings and to grieve.

Moods can be unpredictable. Common behaviors include withdrawal and sullenness, anger and fighting, being argumentative, or denial or guilt.

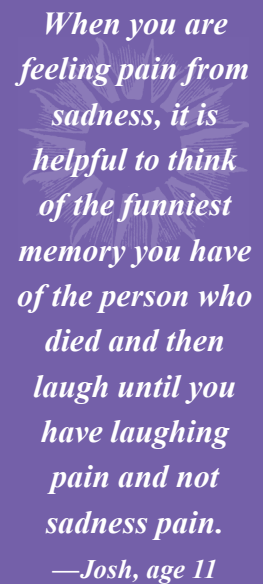
Children this age often do not tell their friends that a parent or someone they love is dying. Often, they are embarrassed or do not want to feel different from others. Some children are reluctant to leave home and become anxious and fearful. Others may start risky behaviors, such as stealing, using drugs or acting out sexually. School grades may worsen.

Some children this age identify with their lost loved one. They sometimes may imitate mannerisms, such as using facial or verbal expressions or gestures. Or they express increased physical concerns, such as body aches and pains or feeling ill.

Sleeping and eating patterns also may change.

How to help

- Assure your child he or she did not say or do anything to cause the death.
- Help identify changes in your child's life that have occurred since the death, such as routines, moods or family roles.
- Encourage your child to talk about what he or she is feeling and thinking, or to choose with whom he or she would like to talk.
- Encourage participation in a support group.
- Allow flexibility in completing schoolwork.
- Reassure your child you will make all attempts to be safe.
For example, provide specific times when you will be home from the store or other outing.



*When you are
feeling pain from
sadness, it is
helpful to think
of the funniest
memory you have
of the person who
died and then
laugh until you
have laughing
pain and not
sadness pain.
—Josh, age 11*

Teens

What they know

Teens recognize fully the irreversible nature of death. They have an adult understanding of death. They see life is fragile and often worry about their own death or the death of someone else they love.

Teens may question religious beliefs or philosophize about life and death. They search for the meaning of death and life.

How they feel

Teens can express grief but tend to hide their feelings. They often do not want to think or talk about the death of someone they love. The death is a reality they would prefer to deny.

Some teens appear to be coping well but may in fact not be. Some try to assume their loved one's roles and responsibilities or they may feel forced into roles they are not prepared to take on.

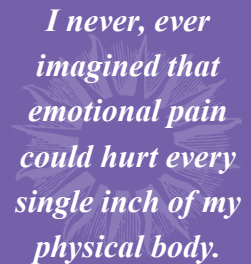
Mood swings are common and there may be marked changes in behavior, for better or worse. Grief reactions may include withdrawal from family and friends or aggression toward and criticism of others.

Angry outbursts, pushing the limits of rules and increased risk taking, such as using drugs and alcohol, reckless driving or sexual promiscuity may occur. Teens also may express sorrow, guilt or regret, or refuse to take any risks at all and be overly careful.

Difficulty concentrating may be a problem as preoccupation with the loss becomes a focus. Some teens refuse to go to school or experience a sudden drop in academic performance.

Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, nightmares, sleepiness and exhaustion are common. An increase or decrease in appetite and frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches or other illnesses also are common.

For some teens, grief reactions can become life threatening. Distress signals that require professional help include substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, and suicidal thoughts, specific plans or attempts.



*I never, ever
imagined that
emotional pain
could hurt every
single inch of my
physical body.*

—Matt, age 16

How to help

- Assure your teen he or she did not cause the death.
- Allow for some dependency and variability in maturity.
- Answer questions honestly. Provide the facts.
- Talk about feelings of helplessness. Tell your teen it is OK to cry. Time will gradually heal the pain as your teen acknowledges his or her grief.
- Discourage your teen from taking on too much adult responsibility.
- Gently help your teen to realize he or she may be over-identifying with your loved one who has died and assuming the role that person played in the family.
- Always be willing to listen—Teens typically want to talk to you on their schedule not yours.
- Encourage participation in a support group.
- Help your teen develop a plan for completing schoolwork.
- Do not get into power struggles. Offer choices.

Children and Funerals

Funerals and mourning rituals help children and teens (as they do with adults) memorialize a loved one who has died. Never force a child to attend or participate. Give your child or teen the choice. Forcing participation can be damaging. To help your child decide, provide as much information as possible about what to expect.

Who will be at the funeral

Explain that relatives, friends and people who knew the person who died will be at the funeral. Ask your child if he or she would like to invite someone, such as a teacher or friend.

If you are participating in the funeral or concerned about giving your child the attention he or she needs, ask a familiar adult friend or family member to help care for your child during the ceremony.

Where the funeral or memorial service (or both) will be held

Describe where the funeral and burial will take place. For example, "First we will go to the church or temple for a special service to celebrate Grandpa's life. Then we will go to the cemetery for the burial." Funerals and memorial services commemorate the life of the deceased person. The memorial service may be held in a special location, such as a park or a family member's home. The deceased person's body may or may not be present at the service.

What will happen at the funeral

Be specific about what will happen at the ceremony. Explain that people will say prayers and talk about the person who died. Some people may play music or sing.

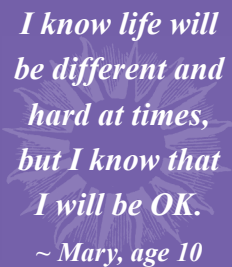
People might experience all kinds of feelings throughout the funeral. Let your child know some people may be crying or laughing, or look confused or as if they feel nothing. Confirm it is OK to be sad and to cry. Reassure your child the feelings will not last forever.

What you will see at the funeral

Tell your child if there will be a casket or cremains (ashes of a cremated body) at the service. Let your child know if the casket is going to be open or closed. Give your child the choice if he or she feels comfortable to view the open casket with you and to touch your loved one. Viewing the body of someone loved who has died provides an opportunity to say goodbye and accept the reality of the death.

If your loved one's body is being viewed, consider explaining the person's body:

- May be in a partially open casket
- Does not move, talk or see you
- Will not come back to life
- Will look and feel different than before the person died (may look puffy, have makeup and feel cool when touched)



*I know life will
be different and
hard at times,
but I know that
I will be OK.
~ Mary, age 10*

If your loved one's body is being cremated, explain what cremation is (see Page 22). Assure your child cremation is not painful for your loved one. Discuss that the body will be turned into ashes and the family will receive a special container, called an *urn*, with the ashes (cremains). Explain whether you will bury the ashes, keep them in a special place or spread them in a special location.

When the funeral will start

Tell your child what time the funeral will start and about how long it will last. Let your child know if he or she gets restless or upset and needs to leave, it is OK. Make sure someone is available to be with your child.

Why a funeral is important

Help your child understand why the family is having a funeral for your loved one. Explain that funerals are an opportunity to express beliefs, feelings and thoughts about death and the person you loved.

Encourage your child to help plan the funeral but do not pressure him or her. Planning can help provide comfort and the understanding that life goes on even though someone has died. Ask your child to help choose which clothes your loved one will wear, pick out flowers, music or readings for the service, decide on a casket, and gather special objects to put in the casket or photos for a memory board.

Ways to Help a Grieving Child

Children's grief ebbs and flows as it does for adults. As they go through different developmental stages as they age, different needs, questions and expressions of grief may arise.

Revisiting their loss from each new perspective is normal. Each child may have different needs for talking, reflecting or understanding as they get older.

Keep attuned to your children. Reminding them of some key messages, such as those listed below, will help them over time.

~ *"I am here for you. You do not have to go through whatever it is you are feeling alone."*

~ *"Asking for help is a good and courageous thing."*

~ *"Having different feelings and thoughts about it all is normal."*

*You can learn
so much from
losing someone
you love.
Mostly you
learn how to
really love.
~ Zach, age 14*

What you can do

- Offer comfort, care, love and attention.
- Be a positive role model. Children's grief responses often will match how you respond to death of a loved one.
- Tell the truth. Be simple and direct.
- Reassure your child he or she is not to blame and is not alone.
- Do not force your child to talk.
- Ask if it is OK to give a hug.
- Listen to your child. Answer the questions he or she asks—even the hard ones.
- Talk about and remember your loved one.
- Keep changes to a minimum.
- Allow choices whenever possible. Resist being overprotective.
- Be patient. Be supportive even when your child is in a bad mood. Be available when your child needs you or is ready to talk.
- Be there at bedtime. Sleep may come hard for grieving children.
- Tell your child's teacher or teachers about a family member who is dying or who has died. Seek additional help for your child if needed.
- Remember special days that may affect your child.
- Plan family times together.
- Let your child know there may be times when he or she feels happy or sad and both are OK.

What you can encourage your child to do

- Talk and ask questions—if not with you, then with another trusted, caring adult in the family, at school, in your faith community or elsewhere.
- Express feelings through drawing, journaling, play, music and games.
- Participate in physical activities to release energy and emotions.
- Understand that playing and being happy is OK.
- Get back to regular routines.
- Eat nutritious meals and snacks and drink plenty of water.
- Keep bedtime routines and stay well rested.
- Plan and participate in the funeral or memorial ceremony.
- Ask for help if needed with school homework or relationship problems with friends.
- Collect objects that serve as reminders of the person who died.
- Make a memory book or create a picture, poem, letter or videotape as an expression of his or her love.

Words to Use When Talking about Death and Funerals

The following list of words and definitions will help you when talking with your children about the death of a loved one.

Autopsy

An autopsy is a physical examination of a dead body. The examination can help to find out how the person died. A special type of doctor does the examination. Not every person who dies is given an autopsy.

Burial

The burial is the part of the funeral when the dead body in the casket is buried in a hole in the ground at the cemetery. The casket is lowered into a protective box in the ground called a *vault* and then covered with dirt. The family may hold a short religious service at the cemetery.

Casket

A casket, also known as a *coffin*, is a large box in which a dead body is placed for viewing and burial. Some caskets are plain or decorated and made of wood or metal. Usually, when a dead body lies in the casket during the funeral, the body only can be seen from the waist up. Family members sometimes put items of special meaning in the casket with the body, such as the person's favorite piece of clothing.

Cemetery

A cemetery is a place where dead people are buried in the ground. Usually, cemeteries are large areas of land surrounded by a fence. Grave markers or tombstones show where people are buried. Sometimes, families and friends bring flowers to leave at the grave marker or tombstone.

Cremation

Some families choose to have their loved one's body cremated. When a body is cremated, it is placed in a very hot fire. The body quickly turns into ashes. Since a dead body does not feel any pain, cremation does not hurt. Some families bury the ashes or put the ashes in a special container called an *urn*. Or, they spread the ashes in a special location important to the dead person or to the family.

Dead

All living people, animals and plants die. A person is dead when his or her breathing stops and heart does not beat. A dead person cannot move or feel pain. A dead person cannot come back to life.

Embalming

Embalming is a special process to prepare a dead body for burial. Embalming involves removing blood and other fluids from the body and replacing them with certain chemicals. These chemicals slow the breakdown of the dead person's body.

Funeral

A funeral is the ceremony to remember the person who died, look at the body and say good-bye. Usually a funeral includes the visitation at a church, temple or funeral home and the burial at the cemetery.

Funeral home

A funeral home is the place where the person's dead body is taken to prepare it for the casket and burial. Funeral homes have rooms used for visitations.

Grave

The place where a dead person's body is buried.

Mausoleum

A mausoleum is a building, monument or tomb that lies above the ground with a burial chamber inside for a deceased (dead) person or persons. The mausoleum may be made of stone, marble or concrete.

Memorial service

A memorial service honors and remembers the person who died. The body is not always present. A memorial service may or may not be a religious service with hymns and prayers. A memorial service often includes a eulogy, a speech or speeches family and friends give to honor the person who died.

Headstone

A headstone marks the burial place of the person who died so family and friends can find the correct grave. The headstone has the dead person's name and date of birth and death engraved (written) on it. Some families do not place a headstone at the grave at the burial. They will place the headstone later.

Urn

An urn is a special container that holds the ashes of a dead person who has been cremated. Some families bury the urn or keep it in a building called a *mausoleum* or at home.

Vault

A vault is the box that protects the casket for burial. When lowering a casket into the ground, the casket is set into the vault in the ground.

Visitation

A visitation, also called a *wake* or *viewing*, takes place in a church or temple, public place or funeral home. The visitation is the time when you can view the closed casket (the dead person is lying inside but is not visible) or view the dead person lying in the open casket. If the person had bad injuries or his or her appearance has changed so that it would be difficult for viewers to see the person, the family may choose to have the casket closed.

The visitation is usually just before the burial, but some visitations last for several days. Visitation also includes gathering before or after a cremation or memorial service without the body present. Visitation is a time to support the family. Often, family members and friends send flowers to the family in memory of the person who died to display at the visitation.

Books to Help Children Cope with Death

Reading books about death and grief with your children can help them understand and accept the loss of a loved one. Books help to create an open environment to ask questions and share information and feelings.

For all ages

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing after Loss by Pat Schweibert and Chuck DeKlyen. Illustrated by Taylor Bills. Perinatal Loss, 1999.

The Next Place by Warren Hanson. Illustrated by Warren Hanson. Tristan Publishing, 1997.

For children

Growing Through Grief—A Memory Book of a Special Loved One by Sarah Kroenke and Daena Esterbrooks. Illustrated by Sara Weingartner. Park Nicollet Methodist Hospice, 2006. (To order, email sarah.kroenke@parknicollet.com.)

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. Bantam Books, 1983.

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Michaelene Mundy. Illustrated by R.W. Alley. Turtleback Books, 1998.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages by Leo Buscagilla, PhD.
Henry Holt and Company, 1982.

The Saddest Time by Norma Simon. Illustrated by Jacqueline Rogers. Albert Whitman & Company, 1986.

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown.
Illustrated by Marc Brown. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 1998.

For teens

Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love by Earl A. Grollman. Beacon Press, 1993.

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends by Helen Fitzgerald.
Fireside, 2000.

For teens and adults

Hope Heals: A Journal of Love, Loss and Memories by Sarah Kroenke and Daena Esterbrooks. Tristan Publishing, 2012.

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