

# Supporting Grieving Children

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The death of a special person is often a very overwhelming experience at any age, and for children it may be confusing or scary. One of the most helpful things adults can do to help support a grieving child or teen is to give them honest information and to leave plenty of room for them to ask questions. While there isn't a script for exactly how to talk to children about grief, there are some things you can do to best help children in their grief.

- **Use honest and age appropriate language.**
  - Be honest when talking to a child after someone has died.
  - Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away", "we lost [the deceased]" or "[the deceased] is sleeping". These terms can be confusing or scary for children. Use honest terms like "dead" or "died".
  - Check in with the child to make sure they understand.
- **Be prepared to answer questions.**
  - When answering questions, use the same language you have used before.
  - Reassure children that questions are okay.
  - Let the child know that it is okay to talk with you about their grief. Be a safe person for them to talk to.
  - Be open to continued discussions about grief. As a children grows and ages, their understanding of death and grief will change and develop.
- **Throw expectations out the window.**
  - We may think we know how someone should react after a death, including children. However, because we are all unique individuals, we will grieve differently with each loss. We must meet children where they are at to support them in their grief. Children will often hear news and then need time to process the information - for example a child may go back to playing like nothing happened. Children process through play. It is helpful to allow them time to process in their own way, while also leaving space for them to talk and share when they are ready.
- **Listen.**
  - Creating a safe, open space for children to ask questions and express their grief is one of the most helpful things adults can do. By allowing children to share their grief experiences, they will not only process their grief in healthy ways, but it can create closer, trusting relationships between that adult and child.
- **Validate all feelings.**
  - Grief is complex. It is important to normalize and validate a wide spectrum of emotions. When we validate what they're feeling, it helps normalize their experiences and allows them to process in healthy ways.
- **Help with processing grief reactions and managing big feelings.**
  - Help children to find helpful ways to process and express their feelings and reactions. Help them create a list of things they enjoy doing, or things that have been helpful to them in the past. Help them come up with a list of things that help them when they are having a hard time.
  - Talking about what to do when big emotions happen, such as talking to a safe person, screaming into or punching a pillow, ripping up or crumpling up paper, can be tools that help with creating a sense of movement with big emotions to get things out.
  - It can be helpful to remind children that grief is an ongoing process and that they may experience "re-grief" as they reach different milestones in their life without that person. Continue to offer support as they reach these milestones.

- **Include children in memorializing and remembrance projects.**
  - Explain to them what's going on with the funeral/end of life events, explain what will happen at the service and think of ways that they can contribute.
  - On special days or events, such as holidays or other life events, check in with children to see if they'd like to do something in particular to remember the deceased, and help them with that task or activity.
  - Help them to make a memorial item or do something special to continue to honor their loved one, examples can be to make an ornament or special painting, go to a special place, have/wear a "linking object", create a scrapbook of special memories, among many other ideas.
- **Model and teach how to honor life.**
  - Children learn by example and look to adults on how to express and process grief. It is helpful to see adults take care of themselves and coping in healthy ways. When adults are not open about expressing their grief, a child may think it's wrong to talk about or express grief and could prevent them from processing their grief in healthy ways.
- **Connect with community resources.**
  - Research resources in your area, as well as nationwide, that can help support the child.
  - Look into grief support groups for youth, as well as individual counselors who work with grieving children.
  - Look for books on grief that can be read with a child or movies that can be watched as a family to help normalize grief and open discussions.
- **Identify secondary losses.**
  - There are many things that change after someone important in our life dies. Secondary losses can be immediate or may happen later in the child's life. Think about what else has changed in the child's life due to the death and offer support for these losses.

## Additional Resources:

Judi's House – [www.judishouse.org](http://www.judishouse.org)  
Program for grieving children and their families. 720-941-0331

Shimmering Wings - operates the Camp Erin® Denver free bereavement camp for bereaved youth. [shimmeringwings.org](http://shimmeringwings.org).

Dougy Center – <https://www.dougy.org/>

Other Online Resources/Materials:

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>

[https://childrengrieve.org/images/website/Resources/Tip\\_Sheet\\_-\\_10\\_Ways\\_to\\_Help\\_a\\_Grieving\\_Child.pdf](https://childrengrieve.org/images/website/Resources/Tip_Sheet_-_10_Ways_to_Help_a_Grieving_Child.pdf)

Grief in Students –  
<https://www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/resources/managing-grief/>

## Books and Films:

### Books for young kids:

- Sun Kisses, Moon Hugs by Susan Schaefer Bernardo
- The Invisible String by Patrice Karst
- I Miss You: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas
- The Memory Box by Joanna Rowland

### Books for teens:

- Teens Dealing with Death: Stories from my Students by Susan Romero
- Teen Grief: Caring for the Grieving Teenage Heart by Gary Roe
- The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens by Alan Wolfelt
- Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve by Jenny Lee Wheeler

### Family films:

Coco	Big Hero 6
Up	Onward
Fly Away Home	The Lion King



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