

Supporting Grieving Children

By Carrie Bauer, BSW, MS



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 feelings. Be a safe person for them to talk to.
 - Be open to continued discussions about loss, death and grief. As a children grows and ages, their understanding of death and grief will change and develop.
 - Be truthful.
- **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. Follow their lead.
- **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.
 - Sharing your feelings is another way to normalize the emotional experiences of grief. You can reassure them that you are feeling big feelings, too.
- **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 and 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.
 - As children get older, include them in deciding who they will share with and what they want to share. Some children want to share with many people, but do not assume all kids want, or need, everybody to know about their loss.
- **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.

What to Expect at Different Ages:

2-4 years old –lack the understanding of death and concepts around grief and loss. Oriented to the present, may not understand “forever”. May experience some regression in their behaviors such as bed wetting, sucking their thumb or sleep issues. Play and consistent routine is helpful.

4-7 years old –may ask more questions and need more concrete information or specifics. may not understand death as finite, may engage in “magical thinking”. May experience regression in behaviors, nightmares, changes in sleeping or eating habits. Experiential activities such as drawing, reminiscing, and physical outlets can help.

7-13 years old –more logical in their thinking, may have a better understanding of death. Anticipate more questions and wanting more information to better understand what happened. May experience fear or think about death and dying more often. May experience behavior regressions, challenges at school, acting out or withdrawal from friends. Allow children to express their emotions honestly and openly and create opportunities to be in control while maintaining healthy boundaries.

13-18 years old – typically, teenagers are more capable of abstract thoughts and have a more mature understanding of the concept of death, dying, grief and loss. They may experience emotions in bigger extremes, have a preference of talking to peers as opposed to parents/family, may act out or engage in risky behavior, and may even struggle with suicidal ideations. Encourage teens to find a safe person to talk too, whether to yourself, family, friends, teachers, or a therapist.



720-748-9908

info@heartlightcenter.org

www.heartlightcenter.org

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