

Supporting Grieving Kids

By: The HeartLight Center Team



Children, teens and young adults grieve in different ways and often re-grieve as they pass different developmental milestones. Providing children with honest, age-appropriate information about a death loss will help give them a framework and understanding of what is happening. While there is not an exact script for what to say, or how to say it, being open, honest and using age-appropriate language will help create a sense of security for children, no matter what age.

Allow children to participate in memorials, funeral services and ongoing rituals.

- Explain what to expect at the funeral/end of life events and think of ways that they can be involved.
- On special days or holidays, check in with children to see if they'd like to do something to remember the deceased and help them with that activity.
- Help children make a memorial item, or do something special, to continue to honor their loss. Some ideas include: making an ornament or special painting, going to a special place, having a "linking object" like a stuffed animal or piece of jewelry and creating a scrapbook of special memories.

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 terms like "dead" or "died".
- Check in with the child to make sure they understand.

Throw expectations out the window.

- Do not have expectations about how children should or should not react.
- Companion children, wherever they are, as they feel what they feel.

Be prepared to answer questions.

- Use the same language you have used before, when answering questions.
- Reassure children that questions are okay.
- If you don't have an answer, it is ok to say, "let me think about that" or "what do you think?"
- Be open to continued discussions about loss, death and grief. As children get older, their understanding of death and grief will change.

Listen.

- Create a safe, open space for children to ask questions and express their grief.
- Allow children to share their feelings and experiences so they can process their loss in a healthy way.
- 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.

Validate all feelings.

- Normalize the feelings your child is having by telling them it is normal to feel however they are feeling. Share a time you, too, felt that way.
- Validate a child's emotions by listening and saying things like, "of course you feel that way".
- Share your feelings, or feelings others may be having to reassure children they are not alone.

Help manage big feelings.

- Identify what to do when feelings feel big
- Create helpful lists such as:
 - Things a child enjoys doing
 - What has been helpful in the past
 - Who a child can talk too
 - What to do when you feel angry or sad

Allow time to process.

- Children will often hear news and then need time to think about the information, especially if it is new. For example a child may go back to playing like nothing happened, or change the subject.
- Children process through play. It can be helpful to play with them and talk, as you are playing and as they initiate conversation.
- As children get older, they will rely more on friends and their social circles. As able, include friends in conversations.

Model and teach how to honor life.

- Lead by example so your child learns how to express and process grief.
- Take care of yourself, in the same way you would want someone you love to take care of themselves.
- Tell your child why you are doing what you are doing. For example, “I’m going for a walk to think about my feelings” or “I’m talking to my friend about [the deceased]”

Connect with your community and resources.

- Research resources in your area, as well as nationwide, that can help support children.
- Look into grief support groups for youth, as well as individual counselors who work with grieving children.
- Read books or watch movies that include grief to normalize feelings and generate discussions.

What to Expect at Different Ages:

2-4 yrs.

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 yrs.

May ask more questions and need more concrete information or specifics. May not understand death as finite, and 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, such as movement, can help.

7-13 yrs.

More logical in their thinking and 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 yrs.

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.

