



## UNDERSTANDING AND HELPING THE GRIEVING CHILD

Each of us will face the death of a loved one at some time. We seek other people, books, counseling or other outlets for support during the grief process. But who helps a child deal with a death or an impending death of someone they love? Naturally children turn to other significant persons – family, friends, neighbors, relatives, and teachers. Although children may understand and respond to terminal illness and to death differently than adults, helping the grieving child is not that different from helping the grieving adult. Your interaction can have an important impact in helping the child deal with a loved one’s terminal illness and death in a healthy way. Here are some insights and suggestions.

### General Factors

1. ***Children grieve as part of a family.*** When a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness, it affects the way in which the family functions. Family roles and responsibilities may adjust to accommodate the new needs in the family structure. Children may grieve not only for the dying loved one, but also for the secondary losses that follow. For example: changes in daily routine, decreased attention from parents, increased individual responsibilities, etc.
2. ***Children re-grieve.*** They work through their grief in cycles. Each time a new developmental milestone is attained, children will integrate and use their newly acquired skills to gain further understanding of their grief. A 7 year-old may again grieve a death that occurred at age 3 because they have now reached an age where they understand that the death is final. Also, the child’s history of loss and coping strategies as well as age and developmental stage will affect his or her re-grieving experience.
3. ***Children are often repetitive in their grief.*** By asking the same questions over and over again, they are able to come to terms with their grief. Answering a child’s repeated questions with the same information gives the child a sense of stability, consistency, and trust in their relationship with you.
4. ***Young children are concrete thinkers.*** Adults frequently use euphemisms when describing death or dying to soften the blow of this harsh reality. Adults need to be careful when using euphemisms so that children aren’t even more scared or further confused. For instance, if an adult says, “We lost Grandma today”, a child may want to know why people aren’t looking for her. A child may also wonder, “If I get lost, will anyone come looking for me?” Similarly, an explanation like “Dad is sleeping peacefully now”, may create a fear of going to bed at night.



### Helpful Suggestions

- Children need clear and honest information about their loved one's diagnosis (cause of illness) and prognosis (prediction of the outcome of the illness) at a level which they can understand.
- Include children in discussions of the patient's condition, changes in health status, and the signs and symptoms of approaching death, etc.
- Encourage children to express their feelings directly. Talk with them about their perceptions and understanding of what is happening with their loved one. Acknowledging your own feelings lets your children know that it is okay to experience and address their own.
- Offer them the choice to participate whenever possible. For instance: helping with care giving at an age appropriate level, attending the funeral / memorial service, viewing the body, participating in good-bye rituals, creating symbolic artwork, etc. (Enclosed in this packet are several activities that families can share together to help them cope with their grief.)

## WHY TELL THE CHILDREN?

Relating sad news is difficult in any case and can be especially challenging when doing so to children.

Please know that it is normal to...

- ◆ want to protect your child, worry about how he/she will be affected by your emotions, be concerned about the effect of the death on him/her, and to be unsure of his/her ability to understand what's happening
- ◆ receive mixed advice from others about how to inform your children. People may warn you to send them away until the funeral is over, make up a story, not say anything about the death, etc. Ask them for their understanding and support as you decide what is best for your child.

It has been shown that children will receive some kind of message simply from your body language, stress, tone of voice, sadness, etc. They may overhear conversations or intuit that something has changed. If you have not explained the reason for your grief, they likely will become concerned, confused, and anxious.

*It is recommended to communicate directly by giving clear, accurate information, geared for their age, in language they can understand.*



## HOW DO WE TELL THE CHILDREN ABOUT...

### ...sadness?

- Your children need to know why you and others are sad.
- They must be told that it is the death that has made you sad. (Without an explanation, they may think your sadness is caused by something that they did or said.)
- Start by saying...*"A very, very sad thing has happened..."* or *"Mommy and Daddy are sad because..."*
- Acknowledging your feelings lets them know that it's okay to be sad.
- Tell them, *"This is how we feel when someone dies."*

### ...what "dead" means?

- Provide children basic information about the human body to assist their understanding of alive vs. dead.
- Try to use language and ideas appropriate to the age of your child to communicate that a dead person's body won't do any of the things it used to do; it won't talk, walk, move, see, or hear, and the person won't be able to feel pain, sadness, anger or discomfort.
- Avoid the use of euphemisms such as "passed away", "left us", "gone on." To a child, this may sound as if the person is taking a trip and can cause him/her to fear that others may not return from trips in the future.
- Refer back to these biological explanations when answering your child's questions that arise, such as:

When will she come back? (She can't. She didn't leave, her body stopped working.)

Why doesn't she move? (She can't move because her body has stopped working.)

Why can't they fix him? (Once the body has stopped working, it can't start again.)

Is he sleeping? (No, when we sleep our body is still working, just resting.)

Can they hear me? (No, they could only hear you if their body was working.)



### ...the cause of death?

- **Old age:** “When a person gets very, very, very old, his body wears out and stops working...”
- **Terminal illness:** “Because the disease couldn’t be stopped, the person got very, very sick and her body wore out and stopped working...”
- **Accident:** “A terrible thing happened (car crash, etc.), his body was badly hurt and couldn’t be fixed. It stopped working...”
- **Stillbirth:** “Sometimes something causes a baby’s body to stop working before it is born. We don’t know why, but it is nothing anyone did or didn’t do...”
- **Suicide – Absolute:** (when there is no doubt the person killed herself): “Sometimes a person’s body gets sick and just doesn’t work right, and also sometimes a person’s mind doesn’t work right. When that happens, they can’t understand things clearly and they think the only way to solve their problems is to stop living – so they kill themselves. However, this is never a solution to problems, the only reason they thought of it is because they weren’t able to think clearly.”
- **Suicide – Questionable:** “Sometimes people take pills to relax or to sleep. Sometimes they forget how many they have taken and think that they need more. These pills make their body slow down, and too many of them make their body stop working. We don’t think the person wanted to die, but that’s what happened to their body.”
- **Homicide:** “Sometimes very bad people do very bad things that hurt or kill...”

### ...the funeral / memorial service?

If a service is planned in honor of your loved one, it is recommended to give your child the choice of attending, after a thorough discussion. Answering questions they may have will help them to feel welcome but some children will still opt not to attend.

- It is important to prepare them in advance by telling them as specifically as possible *what will happen*.

(Change the sample explanation below to fit your plans and special traditions.)

“\_\_\_\_\_ will be taken from \_\_\_\_\_, where he died, to the funeral home. At the funeral home, \_\_\_\_\_ will be dressed in clothes that he liked and put into a casket. A casket is a box we use so that when \_\_\_\_\_ is buried in the ground, no dirt will get on him. Because \_\_\_\_\_’s body isn’t working any more, it won’t move or do any of the things it used to do. But it will look like \_\_\_\_\_.

People will come and visit us and say how sorry they are that \_\_\_\_\_ died. After \_\_\_ days, the casket will be closed and taken to church where people will say prayers for \_\_\_\_\_.

- Also, provide information about who will attend, and what people might say or do at the service.
- Describe the room in the funeral home / chapel: color of carpet, music, flowers, paintings or religious symbols that may be present.



- Give details of what to expect if viewing the body in an open casket. (This is helpful for young children to grasp that the person is, in fact, dead.) Explain that the person will be lying down, not moving, and what they will be wearing. Explain any change in appearance due to illness, weight loss, or trauma. “It’s still Grandpa’s body but you know he was sick and lost a lot of weight so he will look thinner...”

### **...burial?**

(If applicable, add to the above information about the service.)

- “Then we will go to the cemetery, where \_\_\_\_\_ will be buried in a hole in the ground in a spot that \_\_\_\_\_ picked out. If you like, you can come to the funeral home and visit for a while, even go to the cemetery. You could bring something to leave with \_\_\_\_\_ if you want, that would be nice.”

### **...cremation?**

- “After we leave the funeral home, \_\_\_\_\_ will be taken to a crematory, a place where his body will be turned into ashes. Then we will take those ashes and \_\_\_\_\_ (scatter them, keep them in an urn, etc.) Since \_\_\_\_\_’s body doesn’t work and doesn’t feel anything, being cremated doesn’t hurt.”



## CHILDREN'S COMMON REACTIONS TO DEATH

Grief looks very different for each person.

- ◆ There are many variables which may affect a child's reactions including but not limited to: age, relationship to person, reason for death, past losses, personality, cultural / religious background, etc.
- ◆ Sadness, anger, guilt, and responsibility are strongly felt emotions that often occur after the death of a loved one.
- ◆ Other typical reactions include: denying that the person is dead, not seeming to care at all, or romanticizing the death.

**Sadness** may look different for each grieving person but is most definitely a component for all. Your child will feel supported by you as you share your own thoughts and feelings of sadness with him/her. Watch for some or all of the following signs of sadness in your child:

- ◆ confusion about what is happening
- ◆ withdrawal emotionally and / or socially
- ◆ refusing to discuss the death at all
- ◆ wanting to join the deceased (suicidal thoughts)

**Anger** is common at the time of a death; it can cause the family even more pain. Understanding it and anticipating it helps parents deal with both their own and their child's anger.

Children may be angry with...

- ◆ ... their *parents* for: not telling them that the person who died was so sick, spending so much time with the sick person, just because they need someone safe with whom to be angry.
- ◆ ... *themselves* for: not intervening earlier (if caused by a preventable cause), having wished that the person would die, not visiting or helping the dying person, not saying good-bye or "I love you."
- ◆ ... *others* for: not taking care of the person who died, hurting or killing the person.
- ◆ ... *the person who died* for: not taking care of herself or putting himself in danger, leaving / dying / abandoning him, causing such family upset, using up the family money before dying, not telling anyone she was sick, committing suicide, not fighting harder against death.
- ◆ ... their *siblings* for: no apparent reason, grieving differently, not seeming to care, not wanting to talk about the death, seeming more privileged.

**Guilt** is another common feeling at the time of a death.

Guilt may stem from...

- ◆ ... anger: How can I be angry at the person who died? How can I be alive when he's dead?



- ◆ ... “should haves”: I should have visited before he died. I should have told him that I loved him
- ◆ ... “shouldn’t haves”: I shouldn’t have left the hospital. I shouldn’t have let him drive the car.

**Responsibility.** Guilt and a feeling of responsibility go hand-in-hand. It is crucial that you help your child understand the cause of death and watch for signs that s/he is feeling responsible.

Children can feel responsible for a person’s death for a number of reasons:

- ◆ They may have been told something that they misunderstood and took literally (“You’re driving me crazy!” or “You’ll be the death of me yet!”)
- ◆ They may connect events that don’t belong together (“If I had sent a ‘get well’ card maybe he wouldn’t have died.”)
- ◆ They indulge in magical thinking (“If I wish hard enough, he’ll come back.” “I got mad and wished that he would die, and now he did!”)
- ◆ They may feel that God has punished their bad behavior by causing the person’s death or that if they had prayed harder the person wouldn’t have died.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GRIEVING CHILD THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENTAL / AGE STAGES REACTIONS TO DEATH

\*Note: Regression — reverting to behaviors the child had previously outgrown — is a common and normal expression of grief in children of all age groups. Keep in mind these regressions will be temporary. The information below may be helpful in understanding changes in your child’s behavior.

### **Newborn — age three**

- No matter how young the child, he/she can sense when things in the family routine are disrupted. They may notice: presence of new people, the sudden absence of a significant person, sadness or anxiety, and / or parents being gone at odd times.
- Watch your child to see if s/he starts acting differently. Among the changes that you may note are: altered eating patterns, fussiness, and/or disrupted sleep schedule.
- Children in this age group cannot comprehend the concept of death, however, they can understand sadness and stress. Prepare yourself for these reactions so that you can respond more sensitively to their needs.



### **Ages three to six**

- Children in this age group believe that death is reversible or temporary. Because they do not understand the concept of ‘finality’, they will ask questions about the dead person’s return. Also, they may not seem to really be affected by the death at all since they expect the person to come back soon.
- Young children are concrete and literal. You must explain the difference between: very, very sick and just sick (like with the flu); very, very old and over 20; very old and very sick, and very old and not sick.
- Preschoolers may think that they are responsible for the person’s death. Similarly, they may believe that if they are “good” enough, perhaps their loved one will magically reappear. It is important that you directly tell your child that the person did not die because of anything that s/he said, did, or didn’t say or do, nor will they be able to bring them back.
- Explain about the emotions that your child may be feeling or observing others feel.

“Crying is okay for everyone (boys, too).” “We are all going to feel bad inside right now, and after awhile, we’ll feel better.” “It’s ok to be mad.” “Some people might have trouble sleeping or eating; these are all natural ways to react when we are grieving.”
- It is common for children in this age group to have nightmares, be confused, or revert to behaviors that he had previously outgrown (bedwetting, thumb sucking, etc.)



### **Ages six to nine**

- Most children in this age range will understand that death is final, but some might still think that the dead person will come back.
- This age group may ask for more details regarding the cause of death. They may view death as a ‘taker’, something that comes and ‘gets you’. Or they may see death as something contagious, like a cold virus, and therefore not feel comfortable in the home of someone who has died. Also, they connect violence with death and may assume that another person killed their loved one.
- It may be helpful to explain the different kinds of illnesses, and then personalize the information regarding your loved one’s circumstances such as “Daddy has cancer and that is not contagious.”
- Some sicknesses are:
  - ...simple and people get well quickly.
  - ...chronic and last a long time.
  - ...serious and need special care.
  - ...contagious and can be caught from others.
  - ...terminal and end in death.
- Again, it’s important to explain about emotions that your child may be feeling or observing in others.

“Some people are going to act surprised and may be scared.”

“It’s ok to feel mad, and/or very sad.” “Everyone is allowed to cry (even boys and men).” “Some people feel like some thing is missing for a while.”

Parents often find it helpful to open up discussion by sharing their own emotional reactions and then asking how the child is feeling.

- Feeling responsible for the death is still a possible reaction at this age. Please have a conversation with your child about his/her lack of fault in the circumstances around the person’s death. (In the event of an accident where the child may have been involved, it is recommended that professional help from a counselor is sought.)
- Social development is occurring during this stage so your child will watch you and others to see what responses and behavior is normal at this time. It may be helpful to discuss the events of a memorial service ahead of time to ease their anxiety regarding social expectations.

### **Ages nine to twelve**

- The concept of the finality of death is grasped by this developmental age. Children are more aware of the impact that a death may have on them and their family. They may be anxious or worried about the family’s economical security or how daily life will change due to the death.



- Children in this age group may experience a broad range of emotions — shock, denial, fear, anger, guilt, depression and even withdrawal. They are more able to articulate what / why they are feeling, if they feel safe, accepted and listened to. Parents may find it helpful to share their own thoughts and feelings with their children as a way of modeling expression and support to one another.
- Kids this age may have difficulty concentrating in school and completing assignments. They are also more aware of social pressure and may be concerned about how to grieve and still fit in with their friends at school. They may either withdraw from peers or ‘act out’ with negative behaviors.
- Increased understanding and awareness of the complexities of grief and the secondary stresses a death may cause in the family, may take a toll physically and lead to higher susceptibility to illnesses or other ailments such as headaches, stomach aches, etc.

### **Ages thirteen to eighteen**

- By the teen years, children have the ability to think abstractly and can truly grasp the reality of death. Their reactions may be very much like any adult’s but don’t assume that they can handle it all on their own. It is still necessary to have open discussion about the death and the family’s responses. Share your own feelings and encourage your teen to verbalize their emotions.
- In addition to wanting answers to the what/where/how questions like kids of all ages, teenagers will also ask why the death occurred. They will likely search out the meaning of life and death in an existential manner, perhaps for the first time.
- The physical component of grief — which can be experienced as tiredness, problems concentrating, and susceptibility to illness — may create difficulties for the teen in meeting expectations at school regarding attendance and classroom performance.
- Anger (toward parents, self, person who died, medical personnel, etc.) may result in noncompliance or acting out.
- Depression may surface more strongly in the teen years.
- Thoughts of suicide (desire to join the one who died) may be present. Your teen may withdraw emotionally from you and/or socially from their friends and activities. Eating and sleeping patterns may change drastically.
- Teens may seek out ways to escape the pain of grief by engaging in high-risk behaviors such as: alcohol and drug use, reckless sexual activity, driving dangerously, etc.
- Teens may be more willing to talk and share their feelings with others outside the family. Encourage them to seek support wherever it is most helpful. If you are concerned about their mental health, or high risk behaviors seek professional help.



## FOR FURTHER READING

You may borrow some of these resources by contacting the Safe Crossings Coordinator at (206) 320-4000 or look for them at your local public library.

### For Parents

#### ***The Grieving Child — A Parent's Guide***

by Helen Fitzgerald

Provides very useful suggestions on helping children cope with the death of a loved one. Includes chapters on dealing with feelings, funerals, adjustments to school, holidays, and dealing with unfinished business.

#### ***How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness***

by Kathleen McCue

A guide on how to talk to children about illness, their thoughts and feelings, and how to help them through the experience.

#### ***Learning to Say Good-bye When a Parent Dies***

by Eda LeShan

Explores problems children face when losing a parent and ways to cope.

#### ***Thank You for Coming to Say Good-bye***

by J. Roberts and J. Johnson

Provides sensitive and helpful information on how to involve children in funerals — what to do before, during, and after the service.

### Ages 3-6

#### ***Everett Anderson's Good-bye***

by Lucille Clifton

African-American boy's story of the experience of his father's death.

#### ***Good-bye Forever***

by Jim and Joan Boulden

Children learn what 'dead' means, what happens when people die, how to understand their feelings, and how to remember the person with love.

#### ***It Must Hurt a Lot***

by Doris Sanford

After a boy's dog is killed, he learns many things he wants to share to help his friends who are hurting.

#### ***Lifetimes***

by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

Explains life and death in a sensitive and natural way.

#### ***So Much to Think About***

by Fred Rodgers

An activity / memory book for kids who have experienced the death of a loved one.

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***Water Bugs and Dragonflies***

by Doris Stickne

Helps to explain the mystery of death to young children from the Christian tradition.

**Ages 6-12**

***Annie and the Old One***

by Miska Miles

Native American grandma, who is dying, teaches her granddaughter about life and death.

***The Fall of Freddie the Leaf***

by Leo Buscaglia

An allegory about life and death as part of the changing seasons of life.

***Rachel and the Upside Down Heart***

by Eileen Dougla

Rachel's dad dies, and she and her mom grieve and adjust to the changes together.

***Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes***

by Eleanor Coerr

A true story about a twelve year old Japanese girl who is dying of cancer and finds hope in the support of her friends and classmates.

***Saying Good-bye***

by Jim and Joan Boulden

Children learn what 'dead' means, what happens when people die, how to understand their feelings, and how to remember the person with love.

***The Tenth Good Thing About Barney***

by Judith Viorst

A boy and his family find ways to remember their cat who died and have a special burial and funeral for him.

**Ages 13-18**

***Facing Change***

by Donna O'Toole

Information to help teens cope, understand, and grow through their losses.

***Fire in My Heart — Ice in My Veins***

by Enid Traisman

A journal for teens who have experienced the death of a loved one.

***The Grieving Teen***

by Helen Fitzgerald

Written for teen readers, organized into short, helpful chapters with information about the grief process and thoughts from teens who've been through grief.

***Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird***

by Jean Little

A friend helps Jeremy, whose father is dying, through his grief.

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