

GRIEF

*Thoughts and tips to help support you
during life's hardest moments.*



OhioHealth

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CHILD AND ADOLESCENT GRIEF



STARTING THE CONVERSATION

It's a natural instinct to want to protect children, especially from the intense pain that comes with learning of someone's death. Many well-meaning adults may think it's best to not tell children or are afraid they won't have the right words to respond. Remember, it's okay to say that you don't know or are unsure. You don't need to have all the answers. The most important message for children to hear is that they can come to you to talk about their feelings or ask questions.

Tips for sharing the news

- + Share information as soon as possible to ensure it's not heard from someone else first and includes what you want your child to know.
 - + Consider a space that is private and quiet with little chance for interruption.
 - + Be mindful of the time of day and avoid times when your child may be hungry, tired or is getting ready for bed.
 - + Take a moment to prepare yourself and practice what you will say.
 - + Consider the child's age and development when choosing language (see page 13).
 - + Provide a simple and honest explanation of how the person died.
 - Start slowly with short and simple language.
 - While telling them the truth is important, it does not mean they need all the details.
 - + Explain in clear terms using words like "died" or "dead" instead of phrases like "he's in a better place" or "she has passed on." Example: "Grandma died. Her body stopped working."
 - Consider what your child is thinking and allow time for questions.
 - This will not be a one-time conversation. It will be ongoing as they process and understand the information.
 - A rule of thumb when deciding how much to share: If your child is old enough to ask the question, they are old enough to hear the answer.
- + It's okay for you to have an emotional response when sharing this information. It may help give your child permission to express feelings and it models healthy responses.
 - + Reassure them that all feelings are okay.
 - + Identify people and places your child can go to for support.
 - + Assure your child that it's okay to remember and talk about the person who died.

COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

The death of a friend or family member is a major loss in a child's life. Grief is described as the internal reaction to a loss, such as a death or another significant change in life. When children experience a death, their grief can affect them emotionally, physically, behaviorally, socially, cognitively and spiritually.

While children of all ages grieve, they grieve differently than adults. They typically express their feelings and reactions to a death in small doses and process the loss over time. This can be confusing to adults when a child expresses sadness or anger about the death, then wants to play or get together with friends.

Grief is an ongoing process that changes as your child matures and reaches a new understanding about the loss. Young people often experience grief reactions at an older age, even when a loss was several years earlier.

Emotional responses

Sadness

- + Missing the person who died
- + Missing out on future experiences with the person

Anger

- + Directed at self, the person who died or others
- + Looking for something or someone to blame

Fear/worries

- + About their safety or a caregiver's
- + Abandonment
- + Wondering who will take care of them if someone else dies
- + Ghosts or spirits

Guilt

- + Concern that their thoughts, worries or actions have caused the death
- + Regrets about things they wish they would have said or done differently

Shock

- + May not talk about feelings or show emotion
- + May feel disbelief or numbness

Loneliness

- + Feeling like they are the only one experiencing a loss

Relief

- + The person is no longer in pain or suffering

Physical responses

- + Headaches
- + Stomachaches
- + Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- + Dreams about their person or nightmares
- + Racing heart
- + Tight chest
- + Crying

Behavioral responses

Regressive behaviors

- + Acting younger than their age
- + Needy or clingy
- + Bedwetting
- + Thumb sucking
- + Difficulty separating from caregivers

Increased sense of responsibility

- + Protective of caregivers or siblings
- + Acting more adult-like
- + Assuming additional responsibilities at home

Disruptive behaviors

- + Acting out
- + Fighting or conflicts
- + Lashing out at friends or family members

Social responses

- + Changes in relationships with friends or family
- + Difficulty trusting others
- + Loss of interest in activities
- + School attendance

Thinking/Cognitive responses

- + Impact on school work and grades
- + Difficulty concentrating
- + Poor memory
- + Disorganization
- + Not understanding the what, why and how of the death
- + Confusion and fear about their own responses

Spiritual responses

- + Exploring beliefs about what happens after death
- + Questioning why this happened to the person or my family



DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

A child's reaction to loss depends on their age and developmental understanding of death. Every child is different and their responses may vary within suggested guidelines.

Birth to 2 years old

Understanding of death

- + Infants and toddlers can and do experience grief in the absence of an attached caregiver; if you are old enough to love, you are old enough to grieve
- + Sense there has been a change
- + Do not understand the concept of life and death
- + View death as separation or abandonment

Common feelings and reactions

- + More intense and frequent tantrums
- + Changes in eating and sleeping
- + Moving back toward younger behaviors (i.e. using a pacifier, thumb sucking, acting clingy)
- + Increased stress when separating from caregivers
- + May ask or look for person who died

How adults can help

- + In order to care for your child, it's important to take care of yourself
- + Keep change to a minimum; continue to provide structure and routine
- + Continue nurturing; increase comfort and physical affection
- + Encourage age-appropriate play and developmental activities

Ages 3 to 5

Understanding of death

- + Sense that there has been a change
- + Do not understand that death is final; see it as something that is temporary and reversible
- + View death as separation or abandonment
- + Wonder if the person who died is coming back or where they went
- + May compare death to sleeping
- + Believe their thoughts, worries or actions caused the death

Common feelings and reactions

- + Unable to express their grief in words, so their feelings come out in behavior and play
- + Ask or look for person who died
- + Ask the same questions or share that their person died repeatedly
- + Engage in pretend play where stuffed animal or toy dies
- + Moving back toward younger behaviors (i.e. bedwetting, using a pacifier, thumb sucking, acting clingy, using baby talk)
- + Increased stress when separating from caregivers at bedtime
- + Display new aggressive behaviors (i.e. hitting, kicking, biting)

How adults can help

- + Explain in clear terms, such as "died" or "dead," instead of terms like "passed on" or "lost."
 - Example: "Grandma died. Her body stopped working."
- + Answer questions simply and honestly; what a child asks usually reflects what they want to know at that time
- + Help give them words to explain what they're feeling
 - Give examples of how you're feeling like, "I am sad today because I am missing Daddy."
- + Let them know that nothing they did, said or thought caused the death
- + Keep change to a minimum; continue to provide structure and routine
- + Continue nurturing; increase comfort and physical affection to help them feel safe and secure
- + Reassure your child that there will be someone to love and care for them
- + Encourage age-appropriate play and developmental activities
- + Draw pictures and read children's books about death together (see page 18)



Ages 6 to 8

Understanding of death

- + Begin to understand that death is final
- + View death as something that only happens to someone who is old or very sick
- + Unable to imagine that someone close to them can die
- + Associate death with angels, skeletons or monsters
- + Concern that their thoughts, worries or actions have caused the death
- + Curious about the physical aspects, like what happens to the body after death

Common feelings and reactions

- + Guilt that their thoughts, worries or actions could have caused the death
- + Ask the same questions repeatedly (e.g. how, why, who else?)
- + Display new aggressive behaviors (ie. hitting, kicking, biting)
- + Defiance to teachers and caregivers
- + Impact on schoolwork and attendance
- + Difficulty concentrating and sitting still
- + Daydreaming more frequently
- + Concern about their own safety or a caregiver's can lead to difficulty separating from caregivers
- + Feel anger at the person for dying

How adults can help

- + Talk about death as a normal part of life
- + Explain in clear terms, such as “died” or “death” instead of terms like “passed on” or “lost”
 - Example: “Grandma died. Her body stopped working. This means she cannot breathe, eat or play.”
- + Answer questions simply and honestly; what a child asks usually reflects what they want to know at that time
- + To address worries that others could die, reassure them that there will be someone to love and care for them
- + Let them know that nothing they did, said or thought caused the death
- + Help give them words to explain what they're feeling
 - Give examples of how you are feeling like, “I am feeling mad today and really missing Mom.”
- + Encourage your child to talk about their person when they want to and model by sharing memories
- + Continue to follow their daily routine and be flexible with choices when possible
 - Rules and structure promote feelings of safety
- + Offer children the opportunity for physical activity and creative outlets to express their feelings
- + Talk with school staff about providing extra support and flexibility
- + Continue nurturing; increase comfort and physical affection to help them feel safe and secure

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES (CONT.)

A child's reaction to loss depends on their age and developmental understanding of death. Every child is different and their responses may vary within suggested guidelines.



Ages 9 to 12

Understanding of death

- + Understand that death is final and something that happens to everyone, especially older people.
- + Still believe that death happens to others and not to someone they know
- + Have more detailed questions about death and dying.
- + Curious about the physical aspects, like what happens to the body after death
- + Starting to form their own opinions about spirituality and what happens after someone dies
- + Awareness of the absence of their person during sports, celebrations, school events, etc.

Common feelings and reactions

- + Wide range of emotions and may not be able to express them or understand the cause of them
- + Concerned about how the death is affecting those around them
- + Feel the need to keep their feelings hidden to protect the adults around them
- + Fears and worries about the safety and health of themselves and others
 - Worried that they or someone else close to them will die
- + Express hard feelings through behaviors such as fighting and having trouble following rules
- + Feelings may change between strong emotional reactions to having no reaction at all

- + Changes in school performance (i.e. grades, attendance, ability to focus)
- + Try to please adults and take on adult responsibilities
- + Feel embarrassed that they are different than peers because of their loss
- + Withdrawal from usual activities and social situations

How adults can help

- + Answer questions directly in words they can understand. Sometimes children fill in the missing information about a death with their own ideas that may not be accurate
- + Explain in clear terms such as “died” or “death” instead of terms like “passed on” or “lost”
 - Example: “Grandma died from a disease called cancer.”
- + Assure them that nothing they did, said or thought caused the death
- + Reassure them that what they are feeling is okay and help them identify healthy ways to express their grief
- + Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of themselves
- + Encourage your child to talk about their person when they want to
- + Talk with school staff about providing extra support and flexibility
- + Continue to follow their daily routine and be flexible with choices when possible
 - Rules and structure promote feelings of safety

Ages 13 to 18

Understanding of death

- + Have a more “adult” view of death and understand that death is final and permanent
- + Awareness about future milestones without their person such as learning to drive, sporting events, graduation, marriage, etc.
- + May question the meaning of life and death

Common feelings and reactions

- + While their understanding of death is adult-like, their feelings and reactions are not
- + Wide range of emotions they may not share or express
- + Feelings may change between strong emotional reactions to having no reaction at all
- + Difficulty navigating the steps towards independence while now needing increased support from adults
- + Difficulty discussing their grief with others
- + Typically seek support from peers and others outside of the family
- + Act like they are okay when with peers to avoid looking different
- + Use jokes and sarcasm to cover up their feelings
- + Struggle with identifying who they are without their person, which may impact their self-esteem and confidence
- + Experience feelings of shame related to the cause of death
- + Changes in school performance (i.e. impact on grades, attendance, ability to focus, disorganization, memory)
- + A new belief that the world is no longer safe
 - Can result in risky behaviors (i.e. driving too fast, breaking rules, skipping school, using drugs or alcohol)
 - Increased fears about the health and safety of others and themselves
- + Withdrawal from or increased involvement in usual activities and social situations
- + Can take on the caregiving role with siblings, peers or other adults

How adults can help

- + Create a safe space to talk with your teen
 - Answer questions honestly
 - You don’t need to have all of the answers
- + Explain the death in clear terms.
 - Example: “Grandma died from a disease called colon cancer and treatment was no longer working.”
- + Assure them that nothing they did, said or thought caused the death
- + Reassure that whatever they are experiencing is normal in grief
- + Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change or fix them
 - Try to avoid distracting them or attempting to cheer them up
 - Listen and be present
- + Ask open-ended questions
 - Example: “What is it like for you?”
 - Listen without judging, interpreting or advising
- + Set a good example by speaking about your own feelings, without putting them in the role of the comforter
- + Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of yourself
- + Continue to follow their daily routine and be flexible with choices when possible
- + Encourage connections with other adults in their life such as family friends, teachers or coaches
- + Talk with school staff about providing extra support and flexibility

ATTENDING FUNERALS OR MEMORIAL SERVICES

Funerals help to honor the life of the person who has died and to provide support for the family and friends. Adults often wonder if it's a good idea to include children and teens in funerals or memorial services. Some may even wonder what age is appropriate for a child to participate in this kind of ritual. There is no specific or right answer to this. Each child is different.

What we do know is that young children do not typically fear seeing the body in the way adults think they do. In fact, it can help them understand the finality of the situation. Allowing them to choose whether to attend the funeral or not is one of the most helpful things a caregiver can do. They should never be forced to go or criticized if they don't want to attend. It's okay for your child to decide not to participate in any aspect of the funeral. Fortunately, it doesn't need to be an all or nothing decision. In order for your child to make a choice, they need to understand what to expect. Start with the basics:

- + **Who...** will be at the funeral or memorial service?
- + **What...** is going to happen? What will they see?
- + **Where...** will the service take place?
- + **When...** will the funeral happen? How long will it last?
- + **Why...** are we doing this?

Additional tips

- + Having your child help in the funeral planning allows them to feel a sense of inclusion and control. Examples could be picking out photos for posters or slideshows, selecting music, writing a letter or drawing a picture to go in the casket.
- + If they are going to view the body, give an age-appropriate description of what your child will see. Discuss what a casket looks like, how the person who died will be laying down with their eyes closed and this is not the same as sleeping and ways the body may look and feel different. When appropriate, allow your child to view the body before the service to give them time to adjust and ask questions.

- + If cremation is chosen, be prepared to talk to your child about what this means. It can be explained as the process which helps change the person's body into ash. An urn is a special container used to hold the ashes. Reassure your child that this process is not painful because bodies that stop working and die cannot feel anything.
- + Share your emotions with your child. It's okay to model honest feelings and reactions that you're experiencing too. Also, prepare the child for possible emotional reactions of others attending the service.
- + Assign someone to sit with your child throughout the ceremony and identify a designated space for them to go to play or if they need a break. It may be helpful for your child to take a special item from home for comfort.
- + Check in with your child as you arrive, throughout the service and in the following days to answer questions and share feelings. Keep the conversation open.



IDEAS FOR REMEMBRANCE

Remembering and honoring the person who died

There are many creative ways to help your child cope with feelings and reactions following a death. It can be helpful to focus on how the person lived and impacted your lives. Together, your family can choose the memories you want to cherish and hold on to. Here are some ideas to consider:

- + Make a memory box and identify items that represent something meaningful to place inside
- + Look through pictures or make a photo album
- + Write a letter to your person
- + Start a journal of stories and memories from people who knew your person
- + Go to familiar places or places you wanted to go to with your person
- + Visit the cemetery or place that reminds you of your person
- + Honor the person on special occasions (e.g. birthdays, holidays, significant dates)
- + Attend a walk or run in memory of your person
- + Give back or participate in a community project



GRIEF COUNSELING

Does my child need grief counseling?

While grief is a normal process, it often frightens us because of how painful and overwhelming it can be. Many question if their child is grieving the “right way” and if their feelings and reactions are normal. There is no one-size-fits-all approach for coping with grief. It’s important to remember that grief is something we learn to live with. If your child is progressing through their grief, reactions should soften in intensity and duration over time. If grief reactions seem exaggerated or persist over long periods of time, it may be helpful to seek counseling. Sometimes it is helpful for your child to talk to someone not connected to the loss.

Our Child and Adolescent Bereavement Team is here to accompany your child on this journey. Support groups, workshops and grief counseling are available to anyone in the community through OhioHealth Hospice Bereavement Services. We encourage you to call bereavement services at **(614) 533-6060** if you would like more information or wish to talk with a bereavement team member.



SUGGESTED GRIEF **RESOURCES**

Below is a list of recommended books, podcasts and online resources which address general grief and coping strategies. It is **not** an all-inclusive list, but merely a few resources that many have found valuable.

Books

For school-aged children

- + ***A Kids Book About Death*** by Taryn Schuelke
 - Provides an open and honest conversation about death
- + ***A Kids Book About Grief*** by Brennan C. Wood
 - Acknowledges grief is natural, normal, and healthy, and it's an experience we all have because we're human
- + ***A Terrible Thing Happened*** by Margaret M. Holmes
 - A story for children who have witnessed or experienced trauma or death
- + ***I Miss You: A First Look at Death*** by Pat Thomas
 - Helps explain in a simple and direct way that grief feelings after a death are normal
- + ***Muddles, Puddles, and Sunshine: Your Activity Book to Help When Someone Has Died*** by Diana Crossley
 - Through prompts and activities, this book offers a structure and an outlet for the many difficult feelings which inevitably follow a death
- + ***The Goodbye Book*** by Todd Parr
 - Explores feelings and reactions related to loss
- + ***The Invisible String*** by Patrice Karst
 - Reminds children how we can remain connected to those that have died through a string of love
- + ***The Memory Box*** by Joanna Rowland
 - Explores the fear of forgetting and ways to hold on to memories
- + ***When Someone Dies: A Children's Mindful How-To Guide on Grief and Loss*** by Andrea Dorn
 - Engages readers to learn how to say goodbye and express emotions
- + ***When Someone Very Special Dies: Child Can Learn to Cope with Grief*** by Marge Heegaard, MA, ATR, LICSW
 - Provides prompts for stories or drawings and is designed to help children cope with grief from family loss and change
- + ***Why Do I feel So Sad? A Grief Book for Children*** by Tracy Lambert, LPC
 - A picture book that describes the many forms of grief, typical responses and ways to remember who died

For teens

- + ***Fire in My Heart, Ice in my Veins*** by Enid Traisman
 - Encourage teens to use their creativity to work through the grieving process using prompts and activities
- + ***Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas*** by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.
 - Suggests activities for teens to express their grief
- + ***Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens*** by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.
 - Uses simple, open-ended questions to allow teens to sort through their feelings and reactions related to the loss
- + ***Teen Grief Journal*** by National Alliance for Children's Grief
 - The journal provides a space for teens to share their grief experience with supportive quotes from other teens who are grieving



Reading (cont.)

For parents and caregivers

- + ***A Parent's Guide to Managing Childhood Grief***
by Katie Lear
 - Offers activities to help children express their grief in healthy ways
- + ***Companioning the Grieving Child***
by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.
 - This guide shows caregivers how to support grieving children with the philosophy that children are the expert of their own grief
- + ***Finding the Words*** by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.
 - Explores how to talk with children and teens about death, suicide, funerals, homicide, cremation and other end-of-life matters
- + ***Healing a Child's Grieving Heart***
by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.
 - Features 100 practical ideas for families, friends and caregivers to provide healthy outlets for grieving children

Online resources

- + Highmark Caring Place
- + National Alliance for Children's Grief
- + National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
- + National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- + Refuge In Grief
- + Speaking Grief
- + The Dougy Center
- + What's Your Grief

Videos

- + Grief Out Loud: Teens Talk About Loss
- + Brené Brown on Empathy
- + Sesame Workshop Grief
- + How to Support a Grieving Friend

Podcasts

- + Grief Out Loud

HELPFUL 24/7 RESOURCES

If there is a life-threatening emergency, please call 911.

The National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:

Text or call 988

The Franklin County Youth Psychiatric Crisis Line:

(614) 722-1800

Crisis Text Line:

Text HOME to 741741

