

Supporting Grieving Children: Before and After Loss

*“Beneath every behavior there is a feeling,
And beneath each feeling is a need,
And when we meet that need,
rather than focus on the behavior,
we begin to deal with the cause –
not the symptom.”*

-Ashleigh Warner, psychologist

A Brief Note from the Bereavement Team

Talking with kids about death and dying is one of the most difficult things most of us will ever do – especially if we are tasked with being the one to break terrible news to a child...and especially, if we too are grieving. We hope that this resource will serve as a guide and support to you as you begin to navigate these challenging conversations. Please know that the Frederick Health Hospice Bereavement Team is here to support you in any way we can – whether that means providing consultation, or even being present and helping to facilitate these conversations with your child. We also offer one-on-one grief counseling, support groups, and grief camps for children and adolescents. Please call 240-566-3030, or visit www.frederickhealthhospice.org for more information.



When to Tell the Children: Preparing Children for the Death of Someone Close to Them

Adults want to protect their children from emotional pain and suffering. This natural urge can be difficult to balance with the desire to be honest and upfront about harsh realities, such as talking about death and dying. While there is no “right time” to tell children about a loved one’s terminal illness that works for every family, there is one certainty: children of all ages benefit from being prepared **in advance** for the death of someone close to them.

Children benefit from honest information

Telling children in advance about the potential death of a family member or friend is beneficial because it:

- fosters an environment of open and honest communication;
- enables children to get factual information from caregivers;
- leaves less opportunity for children to imagine different or inaccurate explanations;
- helps children make sense of the physical changes they see happening to a person who is unwell;
- creates an opportunity for the ill person to play a role in preparing children for the possibility of his or her death;
- allows time to put additional support systems in place, such as school counselors, therapists, and grief programs, where available;
- enables children to grieve with the adults in their lives, instead of alone and from the sidelines. Caregivers can help children understand that their emotions and those of others around them are healthy and natural;
- gives children the chance, when the death of a loved one is imminent, to say goodbye in a way that feels appropriate for them or to just be with the person with a shared knowledge that their time together (at least physically) is limited;
- enhances the trust between children and their primary caregivers.

Provide information about what to expect

Knowing what to expect helps to ease the fear of the unknown. Children and adolescents also may have to adjust certain behaviors because of the physical limitations of the person with illness.

You might want to share information about any of these:

- treatments;
- where the person will be cared for (home, hospital, other environment);



- side effects that might occur as a result of medications or procedures. For example, you might let the child know that the person with illness may be more tired than usual, may look different, or may not be able to participate in activities;
- symptoms of illness. For example, if the person with the illness has back pain, the child should be aware that a cuddle while sitting on the adult's knees may not be possible.
- what they might observe as their loved one's illness progresses. Telling children that their loved one's appearance might change, that they may lose weight, and that they may become more tired and spend more time sleeping, can all be pieces of helpful information in preparing a child for what they might observe.

Prepare for visits to new environments

Describing the health care environment in advance of a visit helps children and youth make sense of what they will see. Imagine yourself as a child...what will you see and notice as you walk into a room? If the patient is using any medical equipment (such as oxygen, a ventilator or an IV line), describe what the equipment looks like and explain its purpose.

If children or youth need to behave in a certain way, prepare them for this too. For example, visitors to an intensive care unit will need to remain quiet, as there are usually several patients being cared for in one area.

You may wonder how involved your child should be as someone becomes more ill. If they are not distressed by the patient's changes and symptoms, and the visits are still welcome, then there is no reason to stop visiting. Often families do not want children to be around someone who is dying. However, this avoidance may lead to more questions and possibly fear developing about illness and the end of life. Making death a natural part of life for children and youth will help them integrate this experience into their lives. Give the child as much information as needed for them to make an informed choice about visiting with their loved one, and assure them that whatever choice they make is okay.

Discuss changes to routine

Children and youth may be very concerned about who will look after them, and how someone's illness may affect their usual routines. This happens especially when the person with the illness is a parent or primary caregiver. Try to clarify who will be looking after them, where they will be cared for, and what changes might occur in their day-to-day routines. If you can, continue to maintain a regular schedule, as structure is important. Most of all, give the child plenty of affection and reassurance that they are still loved very much and will be cared for.



Speaking to more than one child

If there are several children in the family, you may want to bring them together for discussions. However, there may be times when you want to set aside some time to talk to each of them individually. If you have children who are particularly sensitive, you may find you have better discussions when they can explore their feelings without their siblings present. You will likely have a sense of what will work best in your situation.

Check in frequently

Check in with children and adolescents frequently by asking them if they have any questions about what is happening or want to talk about how they are feeling. This will let them know that they can talk to you about their feelings. Exploring why they have these feelings can also be helpful. You may also want to discuss how you're feeling and that's okay. Children will recognize that the situation is sad, and it can be helpful for them to know that adults are experiencing the same emotions that they are.

It's also good to let children and adolescents know that it's okay if they don't want to talk. Simply letting them know that you are available if and when they are ready to share, and then allowing them space can be very powerful. It is worth noting too, that some young people may fear upsetting other family members, so offering the support of someone outside of the immediate family unit – such as an uncle or aunt, pastor or rabbi, or close family friend – can provide a young person with plenty of options for sharing about their experience.

Withholding information can create challenges

Most children and youth can sense when adults are withholding information, which can cause them to imagine alternate scenarios – some of which might be more disturbing to them than what is actually happening.

When information is withheld, children may learn about an impending death only by overhearing conversations not intended for their ears. Or they may hear it from people outside the immediate family. Children really benefit from learning of such news directly from their parents or guardians before hearing it from others. It can be difficult, or even impossible, to control the flow of information outside the family. Therefore, the sooner family members open up conversations about dying with their kids, the less likely kids are to learn such upsetting news elsewhere.

There is a trust issue as well. If children discover that their parents or guardians knew about a loved one's impending death but intentionally didn't tell them, they may have difficulty trusting their caregivers in the future. This creates additional challenges in the children's grief process.



Determining timing

Even when caregivers are convinced they need to be honest about an impending death, deciding when to share this heartbreaking news with children can be a daunting task. Nevertheless, there are times more ideal than others for telling children (for example, telling them right before dropping them off at school would not a good time).

For most families, the “right time” will always be hard to determine. It rarely feels “right” to share such information, especially in the case of a dying parent or sibling. The task is always difficult emotionally and often feels opposite to what adults think they should do. However, setting aside time for this specific purpose is important. Some of the following strategies can be helpful guidelines :

- Ask children to describe what they already know about the situation. Many caregivers are surprised to learn that some children have already considered the likelihood of the loved one dying.
- Reassure children that talking about the likelihood of death does not increase the chances of the death occurring. Children often engage in “magical thinking.” This can make them feel responsible for good and bad outcomes, despite not actually having any control over them. Providing children with facts and concrete explanations can help them focus on things that are actually within their control (such as how to spend time with their family member). Knowing what to expect can help them let go of things beyond their control (such as worrying about when the person will die).
- Ask children how much information they want. Do they want a lot of information or just the most important information? Some children need more information than other children and benefit from being told about the prognosis as soon as possible. It’s also important to let children know that they can change their minds later on if they would like more or less information.
- Create an environment where children feel safe asking questions. Adults can invite children to ask any questions they have about the illness, even the hard questions. Children may ask: “Could Dad die from his cancer?” It’s important to answer such questions honestly. Keep in mind that it is okay to answer with “I don’t know” if you do not have the answer to their question – it can even be a relief for children to hear that adults may not have all the answers to their questions. Adults can provide reassurance that even though they do not have all the answers, it is still important to talk and wonder about these hard things together.
- Recognize that it’s unnecessary to hold off telling children until “all of the medical information” is obtained. Many families think they shouldn’t talk to children until they have more information (more test results, a more accurate prognosis), but children can appreciate being a part of the experience of uncertainty with the adults in their life.
- Ask the physician directly for an estimation as to how long the person will live. If the death may be imminent, it’s important to share that information with children right away.

While there is the possibility of children discovering a loved one's illness "too late," there is not really a chance of them learning what is happening "too early." Some families are open with their children about the likelihood of death even from the time of diagnosis. This is an approach that works well for many children. Telling the truth from the beginning sets the stage for an openness that needs to be there throughout the illness and afterward.

Many families are pleasantly surprised to find that children tend to resume their regular activities and interests quite quickly after learning a parent or sibling may die. Children process information very differently than adults, and may go back and forth between wanting and processing new information, and engaging in daily activities and fun. As well, parents often feel greatly relieved once everything is out in the open, as they no longer need to spend energy on trying to control the flow of information.

An important note: knowing someone will die and actually experiencing the death can be two very different things. Children may still be shocked or surprised when a family member dies, even if they've been well prepared beforehand. This is not a failing on the part of whoever shared the information, but rather a reflection of how children process information and their limited understanding of death. Please refer to the other sections of this booklet for information on how to talk to children about death and loss.

Allowing children the opportunity to say "Goodbye"

Although it may be difficult, it is important to allow the child the opportunity to say goodbye to their dying loved one. As with anything else in the grief and loss process, it is essential to give the child a choice of how they want to say goodbye or even if they want to say goodbye at all.

First and foremost, the child should be prepared for what they are going to see, including any medical equipment and physical changes in the dying person such as a lack of eating and drinking or difficulty breathing. Additionally, the child should know that the dying person may not be responsive or may be very tired and not up to a long visit. However, there are still ways for the child to interact with the dying person. Even if the person no longer responds to their visitors, the child can still talk to the person and perhaps tell them about their day at school or recall happy memories of the dying loved one. The child may also just simply wish to sit next to the dying patient and read or draw.

The child will undoubtedly have questions; make sure the child knows they are free to ask about anything they are curious about or don't understand. Even if you don't know the answer to the child's question, it is okay to tell them you don't know and offer to find out the information together.

Again, it is also okay if the child does not wish to visit or does not wish to say goodbye in the same way that you do. Allowing the child to have choices can help them manage the grieving process later on.



Saying goodbye to a dying person is less about the “saying goodbye event” or final visit, and more about helping the child to make final memories with the person they love, and letting them know that their feelings are valid and important.

Honesty helps prepare children for life

When parents choose not to inform children of an impending death in the family, they undoubtedly have the best of intentions. Often, they are just trying to protect their children from emotional pain. In addition, facing one’s own mortality or dealing with the potential death of a family member takes a tremendous emotional, physical, and spiritual toll on an individual. This makes finding the best way to support children that much more of a challenge. Many adults fear they will say something that “makes things even worse,” however, the best protection for their children is to prepare them for life’s hardships, such as an impending death.

Preparing children for a death does not eliminate the heartbreak of the death. It helps children make sense of what is unfolding around them. Being prepared by caring adults for one of life’s most difficult situations helps equip children with the emotional tools they need to withstand life’s inevitable challenges.

Previous section adapted from Canadian Virtual Hospice (<http://www.virtualhospice.ca/>)



Talking with your Children: Common Questions Children Ask About Death and Dying

What does it mean to be dead?

“All living things die. Living things (people, plants and animals) eat, breathe, and grow. Like all living things, people eventually die. When people die, they stop breathing, eating, and growing.”

Why do people die?

“People die for many reasons. Sometimes people grow old, and their bodies stop working. Some people are involved in bad accidents, and some people develop diseases and illnesses. When this happens, their bodies shut down and stop working.

It seems so unfair when someone we love dies. Everyone will lose someone that they love at some time in their lives. Death happens to everyone, and everyone is loved by someone. It helps to know that we are not alone.”

What is death like?

“When someone dies, they don’t come back to life. It is not like sleeping or resting. Their bodies never work again. Death is forever.”

Does it hurt to die?

“Death is usually not painful. When someone is old, dying is almost always quiet. When someone dies in an accident, they often feel no pain because death comes so quickly. Even for people that are very sick, doctors can prescribe medications that usually help relieve the pain.”

Why do I have so many mixed-up feelings?

“It is natural to have mixed-up feelings when someone you love dies. You may feel sad, lonely, guilty, confused, angry, glad, etc. Everyone has some of these different feelings. It is natural to feel the pain. It hurts very much but as time goes by it begins to hurt less. Your feelings are normal. Don’t be afraid of them. Talking about them can really help.”

Is it my fault that the person died?

“It is not your fault, their fault, or God’s fault. A person dies when their bodies stop working. It has nothing to do with anything you may have said, felt, done, or not have done.”

(If this fits with your faith/belief system)

Where do people go when they die? (This may be a good place to open the conversation and explore what your child thinks happens when someone dies: “Where do you think people go when they die?”)

There are many answers to this question. Here is just one possibility:

“Many people believe that when someone dies, a part of that person lives on and goes to Heaven or an afterlife. The part of us that lives on is the part that lets us feel our feelings. It is called our spirit or our soul. Our spirit/soul never dies. We cannot see someone’s spirit/soul, nor can we see Heaven/afterlife, but we have faith in them. To have faith is to believe in something we cannot see. Others believe that when a person dies, they are reincarnated or reborn to continue living on as another being. What do you think?”

Will I ever again see the person who has died?

“You’re probably really missing the person who has died. It’s really hard to miss someone so much. You may always miss them, but you won’t always feel this sad. Someday, a long, long time from now, you may be with that person in Heaven/afterlife.

Even after someone dies, there are ways we can continue to feel close to them. Having photos of them around, visiting their grave, listening to songs they liked, eating their favorite food, sharing memories, or keeping/creating significant objects are all ways we can keep a person close.”

How to Help a Grieving Child: The Basics

Answer the questions they ask. Even the hard ones.

Kids learn by asking questions. When they ask questions about a death, it's usually a sign that they're curious about something they don't understand. As an adult, a couple of the most important things you can do for children is to let them know that **all** questions are okay to ask, and to answer questions truthfully. As adults, we often have the instinct to protect children and may think that withholding information that we think might be upsetting or painful is best. However, withholding information can actually be more harmful to a child in the long run.

Be sensitive to their age and the language they use, and take their cues as to how to answer. No child wants to hear a clinical, adult-sounding answer to their question, but they don't want to be lied to, either. By listening to the words they use we can get insight into what information they are really seeking, and the best way to provide them with that information.

As a rule, less is often best: by letting the child lead the conversation, and answering their questions directly and honestly, but answering only what is being asked, we can lessen the risk of sharing information that the child might not yet be ready to process.

Often the hardest time to be direct is right after a death. When a child asks what happened, use concrete words such as "died" or "killed" instead of vague terms like "passed away." A young child who hears his mother say, "Dad passed away" or, "I lost my husband," may be expecting that his father will return or simply needs to be found.

Give choices whenever possible.

Children appreciate having choices as much as adults do. Choice can be especially important during this time because there is so much that feels out of control and overwhelming. Even being able to make small choices can help a child to feel more secure and like they have some control over what's happening.

It is a meaningful and important experience for children to have the opportunity to say goodbye to their loved one in a way that feels right to them – if possible, both before and after the death. In the pages that follow, additional information is provided about how to prepare a child to see their loved one nearing the end of their life.



Children can also be included in the selection of the deceased's casket, clothing, flowers and the funeral/memorial service itself. Some children may also want to speak or write something to be included in the service, or participate in some other way.

Having choices helps children to say goodbye and to grieve in the way that is right for them. Try as much as possible to provide options – as well as plenty of reassurance that there is no “wrong” choice. Providing simple explanations of what the different choices will look like can help children to more easily choose what feels right for them. Let them know that whatever they're feeling is okay.

Sometimes children in the same family will choose differently. For example, one child may want pictures and memorabilia of the person who died, while another may feel uncomfortable with too many reminders around. If you are a parent, ask your child what feels right to them. Don't assume that what holds true for one child – or yourself – will be the same for another.

Talk about and remember the person who died.

Remembering the person who died is part of the healing process. One way to remember is simply to talk about the person who died. It's good to use his/her name and to share what you remember. You might say, “Your dad really liked this song,” or “Your mom made the best apple pie.”

Bringing up the name of the person who died is one way to give the child permission to share his or her feelings and memories about the deceased. It reminds the child that it is not “taboo” to talk about the deceased. Sharing a memory has a similar effect. It also reminds the child that the person who died will continue to “live on” and impact the lives of those left behind. If a child feels that they cannot talk about their loved one it can greatly impact their grief experience, and their ability to heal. Encourage them to talk about their loved one in whatever ways feel right to them.

Many children also like to have keepsakes of the person who died, such as objects which hold an emotional or relational significance. For example, after her father died, Laura, 11, wanted to keep several of his favorite t-shirts, and often wears them as nightgowns. With her mother's help, Laura also made a collage of photographs of her and her dad and has it hanging on her bedroom wall. Jacob, 7, has a teddy bear that some thoughtful family friends made for him using one of his father's flannel shirts. When Jacob feels sad, he likes to hug the bear and says it makes him feel like “Daddy is hugging me back.”

Respect Differences in Grieving Styles

Children often grieve differently from their parents and siblings. Some children want to talk about what's happening, while others want to be left alone. Some like to stay busy and others withdraw from all activities and stay home. Younger children may be clingy, whereas teens may prefer to spend time on their own or with peers.



One of the activities the grief counselors at Frederick Health Hospice often do with grieving families is mask-making. Each person decorates a mask – the outside represents what they show to other people, while the inside represents what they're really feeling inside. People are often very surprised to discover what their family members are truly feeling! By talking about grief and sharing feelings, families can help each other to heal and reduce the hurt and confusion that can sometimes come when loved ones are grieving in very different ways from each other.

Recognizing that each person grieves in their own way is essential to the healing process for a family. Listen to children talk about their feelings and watch their behavior, and you will help clarify and affirm these natural differences.

Listen without Judgment

One of the most helpful and healing things an adult can do for a child is to listen to his or her experiences without jumping to judge, evaluate or fix. Well-meaning adults often try to comfort a child with phrases such as, "I know just how you feel," or advice such as "get over it" or "move on." While the intentions to soothe a hurting child are correct, using such responses negates the child's own experiences and feelings, and may discourage them from sharing.

If a child says something like, "I miss my Dad," try to simply reflect back what you've heard, using their words, so they know that they're being heard (e.g. "I know you really miss your dad. That must be so hard."). Use open-ended questions such as "Can you tell me about that?" or "What has this been like for you?"; children are more likely to share their feelings without pressure to respond in a certain way. This is just one way we can validate their experiences and emotions, helping them regain a sense of safety, balance and control.

Perhaps, most simply, it's okay to just *be* with the child, letting them cry, or simply sitting with them quietly. For many children, knowing that they have someone who cares about them and is there for them – and not going anywhere – might be the most important thing we can do.

Allow for Saying Goodbye

Allowing children and teens to say goodbye to the person who died is important in beginning the grieving process. Attending a funeral or memorial service enables children and teens to see how valued and important the person was to others and to know that grieving the loss is okay. Even if a child might seem "too young" to attend a funeral or service, it is important to give the child some choice in the matter.

A way to balance any discomfort you might feel with allowing a child to make their own choice can be through accurately and thoroughly describing what the child is likely to see and hear if they attend the service. Before the service, let children know what is going to happen, who will be there, where and



when it takes place and why it's important. Children who are prepared with this information are better able to make the choice about attending the funeral.

Should they choose not to participate, invite them to create their own commemorative ritual or activity for saying goodbye—planting a flower or tree, or holding a candle-lighting ceremony. Reassure them that any choice they make is okay and that no one will be upset with them, regardless of what choice they make.

Take a Break

Children grieve in cycles. For example, they may be more inclined to play and divert their focus from the death when the death is recent and parents are grieving intensely. Immediately after learning that his mother died, Caleb, age 9, asked if he could go play video games. While his father was shocked and wondered if Caleb understood what he was being told, the grief counselor who was there explained to his dad that Caleb just needed some time to process what had happened. Later on, Caleb returned and asked another question about his mother's death – and then went back to playing video games.

Behavior like Caleb's is very common throughout the grief process. More than adults, children need time to take a break from grief. It is important to know that it's okay to take a break. Having fun or laughing is not disrespectful to the person who died; this is a vital part of grieving, too, and is well within the realm of normal behavior for grieving children and adolescents.



Developmental Responses to Grief

While everyone grieves differently, there are some behaviors and emotions commonly expressed by children depending on their developmental level.

Ages 2- to 4-years-old

Developmental stage

Children this age do not fully understand that death is permanent and universal. They are most likely to express themselves through their behavior and play.

Concept of death

Young children see death as reversible and are starting to wonder if death happens to everyone. You might hear questions like: “My mom died? When will she be home?” and “Will you die too? What about me?”

Common responses to grief

- General anxiety
- Crying
- Irregular sleep
- Clinginess/need to be held
- Irritability
- Temper tantrums
- Telling the story to anyone, including strangers
- Repetitive questions
- Behavior regression – may need help with tasks they’ve already learned

Ways to help

- Create a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability, especially around starting and ending the day.
- Provide short, honest explanation of the death. “Mommy died. Her body stopped working.” Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- Provide opportunities for play.
- Give choices whenever possible. “Do you want a pop tart or cold cereal?”
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.

Ages 5- to 8-years-old

Developmental stage

Children this age are exploring their independence and trying tasks on their own. They are very concrete thinkers, with a tendency towards magical/fantasy thoughts.

Concept of death

In this age range, children often still see death as reversible. They can also feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die. They may say things like: "It's my fault. I was mad and wished she'd die."

Common responses to grief

- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits
- Repetitive questions – How? Why? Who else?
- Concerns about safety and abandonment
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Nightmares
- Regressive behaviors – may need help with tasks they've already learned (can't tie shoes, bedwetting)
- Behavior changes: high/low energy, kicking/hitting
- Physical complaints: stomachaches, headaches, body pain

Ways to help

- Explain the death honestly using concrete language. "Daddy's heart stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Be prepared for, and patient with, repetitive questions.
- Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play.
- Allow children to talk about the experience and ask questions.
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.
- Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or tomorrow morning?"

Ages 8- to 12-years-old

Developmental stage

Children in this age group may still be concrete thinkers, but are beginning to understand abstract ideas like death and grief. They often start making closer connections with friends and activities outside their home and family.



Concept of death

Children this age begin to understand that death is permanent and start thinking about how the loss will affect them over the long-term. Some children will focus on the details of what happened to the body of the person who died. Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that their thoughts and actions made the death happen. They may say or think things like: "If I had done my chores, my mom wouldn't have died." or "I think it was my fault my brother died because I was mean to him."

Common responses to grief

- Express big energy through behavior sometimes seen as acting out
- Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others - "The world is no longer safe"
- Worries about something bad happening again
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Physical complaints: headaches, stomach aches, body pain
- Using play and talk to recreate the event
- Detailed questions about death and dying
- Wide range of emotions: rage, revenge, guilt, sadness, relief, and worry
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, light, movement, and change
- Withdrawal from social situations

Ways to help

- Inform yourself about what happened. Answer questions clearly and accurately. Even though children this age are starting to grasp abstract thought, it's still helpful to use the words dead and died and avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost, expired.
- Provide a variety of activities for expression: talk, art, physical activity, play, writing, music.
- Help children identify people and activities that help them feel safe and supported.
- Maintain routines and limits, but be flexible when needed.
- Give children choices whenever possible, "Would you rather set the table or put away the dishes after we eat?"
- Work to re-establish safety and predictability in daily life.
- Model expressing emotions and taking care of yourself.
- Be a good listener. Avoid giving advice (unless they ask for it), analyzing, or dismissing their experiences.
- After the death of a parent, avoid reinforcing the idea that children must step into a more adult role.
- Talk with teachers about providing extra support and flexibility with assignments.
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.



Ages 13- to 18-years-old

Developmental stage

Teens are cognitively able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death. They begin to see themselves as unique individuals, separate from their role in the family and may wrestle with identity and who they want to be in the world. There can be significant changes in their priorities, spirituality/faith, sexuality, and physical appearance. Teens often rely on peers and others outside the family for support.

Concept of death

While teens understand death is permanent, they may have unspoken magical thoughts of the person being on a long trip, etc. They may also delve into questions about the meaning of life, death, and other traumatic events.

Common responses to grief

- Withdrawal from family or other support networks/focused on connections with peers
- Increased risk taking: drugs/alcohol, unsafe behaviors, reckless driving
- Inability to concentrate (school difficulties)/pushing themselves to succeed and be perfect
- Difficulty sleeping, exhaustion
- Lack of appetite/eating too much
- Unpredictable and at times intense emotional reactions: anger, sadness, guilt, relief, anxiety
- Uncomfortable discussing the death or their experiences with parents and caregivers
- Worry about safety of self and others
- Fear about death or violence happening again
- Confusion over role identity in the family
- Attempts to take on caregiving/parent role with younger siblings and other adults
- May have thoughts of suicide and self-harm
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, movement, light

Ways to help

- Reinforce assurances of safety and security, even if teens don't express concerns.
- Maintain routines and set clear expectations, but be flexible when needed.
- Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix, or take them away.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Provide choices whenever possible. "I'd like to do something to honor your dad's birthday, would you like to be part of that? What ideas do you have?"
- Adjust expectations for concentration and task completion when necessary.
- After the death of a parent, avoid reinforcing the idea that teens must step into a more adult role.



- Assist teens to connect with support systems, including other adults (family, family friends, teachers, coaches).
- Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of yourself.
- Ask open ended questions (“What is it like for you?”) and listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or minimizing.
- Have patience with teens’ wide range of reactions and questions.
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

Previous section adapted from the book 35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child created by The Dougy Center. To order a copy of the book, visit their website www.dougy.org or contact 503-775-5683.



Frequently Asked Questions from Parents/Caregivers Raising Bereaved Children

1. How do I tell my child that someone has died?

Telling a child that someone they love has died ranks among the most difficult tasks a parent/guardian will encounter. There is no “one size fits all” in terms of what to say, but there are a few general principles that may help. The explanation you offer your children will vary depending on the circumstances of the family member’s death; was there an acute or long term illness, or did the death occur suddenly and without warning?

In either case, it is important to talk to your children as soon as possible after the death. Start simply and honestly, and preferably in person, by saying something like, “I have some sad news to share with you. Today your Dad was in a car accident. The ambulance took him to the hospital but he was hurt too badly and he died.” First and foremost, be honest and avoid any temptation to alter the truth. If there are questions you can’t answer, say, “I don’t know, but I can try to find out.”

You may want to wait and see what questions your children have before giving more information than they can handle at one time. It’s also helpful to reassure them that, “this is hard, but we will get through it together.”

2. Should my child attend and/or participate in the funeral?

While it is natural to want to “protect” children from the painful reality of death, end of life rituals are vital to a child’s understanding of death and a key component of grief and mourning. Funerals are communal events, which we have been performing since the beginning of time, across continents and cultures. Allowing children the option to attend and participate in these significant end of life rituals is important.

Start by telling them what it will look like. Walk them through what they will see, who might come, what people might say, and how people might feel. Children are wonderfully inquisitive and they will be curious at the funeral.

Answer questions honestly and confess when you don’t know the answer. Many parents find it helpful to have a point person during the funeral. Identify someone you and your child trust to be available if your child wants to take a break or stop participating in the ritual.

Give kids the facts they need, normalize the experience, and let them know their choices. If they decide they do not want to participate that’s okay, too. Just be sure they are making the decision with unbiased facts.



3. What reactions might I expect to see with my grieving child?

Your child will grieve in his or her own unique way. How they grieve will depend on many different factors including their age, their stage of cognitive development; cultural influences; their relationship with the deceased and most importantly, how you are grieving.

Young children up to age 6 are subject to the kind of illogical or magical thinking typical of that developmental stage. They are also egocentric and may think that somehow they caused the death of their loved one. In addition, young children don't understand that death is irreversible and may be waiting for their loved one to return. Young children need reassurance, comfort and patience on your part as you respond to their questions.

School aged children understand that death is permanent but still struggle to make sense of what happened. Respond to their questions with truthful, direct language and know that they are old enough to hear the answer if they've asked the question. Children of this age may lack the ability to verbalize their feelings and may behave in ways that cause additional challenges. Children may have trouble tolerating strong emotions that are triggered by reminders of the deceased and will need to learn ways to cope with those feelings and thoughts. Parents and caregivers can provide reassurance, and bereavement support programs can provide opportunities for children to connect with others who are also coping with a death in the family.

Adolescents are also egocentric and struggle with guilt and regret when a loved one dies. They may attempt to cope with their grief in ways that can be impulsive or even unhealthy. In addition to keeping the lines of communication open with their teens, parents and caregivers can promote supportive relationships. Participation in grief support programs with similarly bereaved teens is also beneficial. Families can encourage teens to continue to pursue the goals they had before the death, including leaving home for college or work after high school graduation.

4. How can I help my child transition back to school? When should they go back to school?

Going back to school after a death in the family can be an emotional experience for children, as well as parents and caregivers. Although there isn't a "right" time to go back to school, it is important to promote a return to routine activities and structure.

Caregivers should consider the child's level of comfort with being separated from supportive adults, and may want to have children attend half days or join children at school for lunch breaks to help ease the transition.

It is important to let school personnel know about the death and share what has been helpful to the child.



The impact of a family death on a child's academic functioning can be unpredictable. Grief reactions can intensify at any time—including during a math test. In some situations, grief can influence a child's ability to make decisions, and impair memory and concentration, resulting in a decline in school performance. There can also be symptoms similar to ADHD, including disorganization, distractibility, hyperactivity and impulsivity.

Grieving students are likely to benefit from additional social, emotional and learning supports. Parents and caregivers may want to request that school personnel consider making additional accommodations for their children, such as opportunities for breaks or time with a counselor during the day, reduced workload or assignment extensions, assistance with organization and time management, or tutoring when needed. Families can advocate for their children by sharing the resources they have found helpful with school personnel.

5. How do I parent a grieving child?

The experience of grief can be difficult for any child to comprehend and sharing their feelings can be a challenge. After a death, children are often left feeling frightened, angry, sad or confused. They may lack the ability to express themselves, or reach out for help, in a clear or mature way.

Often when a child misbehaves they are trying to communicate a need for help, or a strong feeling, and simply lack the vocabulary and skills needed. Adults may see negative or "acting out" behavior as intentional, but sometimes it is just a reflection of the child's limitations and desire for support.

While no loss experience should excuse antisocial or dangerous behavior, it is important to not miss the messages in the child's actions.

Set clear limits for the negative behavior and focus on safety being absolute, while also offering healthier ways for the child to express him or herself.

Be confident, but not overly critical, when commenting on misbehavior.

When a child doesn't want to "talk," parents and caregivers can still model healthy self-expression by sharing their own feelings.

When we help children find healthy ways to share their feelings and needs, negative behaviors are less likely to occur.

6. Will my child be okay?

After the death of a loved one, parents and caregivers are often concerned about their children's ability to cope. It is also natural to see changes in children's behaviors after a death, including signs of sadness, anger, and fear, and while the field of childhood grief is still learning about how children



function after a death, current research indicates that bereaved youth usually go on to lead healthy and productive lives.

Nevertheless, it is helpful to be aware of signs that can tell us when a child may be in need of more formalized, professional support. Some behaviors that might indicate the need for further support include:

- (1) inability to keep up with daily tasks, such as regularly attending school, completing homework, personal hygiene;
- (2) significant, ongoing signs of extreme sadness, sobbing, or social withdrawal;
- (3) risky, harmful behaviors (drug use, reckless driving, stealing, promiscuity);
- (4) inability to acknowledge the death, or appearing numb or totally disconnected from the reality of the death; or
- (5) persistent fantasies about ending his/her life in order to be reunited with the deceased person in an afterlife.

It is also important for parents and caregivers to trust their instincts about whether their child is struggling excessively to cope in the aftermath of a death – trusted adults are often the true “experts” when it comes to observing uncharacteristic behavioral changes in a child.

Previous section is from the National Alliance for Grieving Children.



Moving forward: “Firsts and Special Events”

Just like with adults, “firsts” after the death of a loved one can be challenging and anxiety-provoking for children. Whether it is the first day back at school, the first family dinner, the first birthday, or the first holiday, planning ahead is a critical part of supporting the grieving child through these milestones.

In many cases, it’s as simple as “checking in” with the child about how they are feeling about the upcoming “first,” and then preparing to be available before, during, and after if the child wants to talk, or receive extra support and affection. As much as is possible, allow children to have some say in how they want the “first” to go (i.e. Do they want to be dropped off at school, rather than take the bus? Do they want to put a place setting at Grandpa’s seat at the Thanksgiving table, or make his favorite kind of pie?)

Sometimes adults may be tempted not to mention the empty seat at the table or on the bleachers, but checking in with the child about how they’re feeling can give them the opportunity – and the permission – to share with you about how they’re feeling, and, by extension, to receive support and reassurance. A simple “It must have felt weird to not have your dad at the game,” or “I’m feeling really sad that your brother won’t be here with us for Christmas – how are you feeling about it?” can be significant in terms of letting a child know it’s okay to talk about how difficult all of these firsts can be.

Keep in mind that what you and your child might feel, or want to do, could be different. Maybe it would feel uncomfortable for you to have a place set for your loved one at the dinner table. Discussing what feels right for everyone and then coming to a solution together is an important part of figuring out how to grieve as a family – maybe setting a place at the table is too much for some, but lighting a candle in memory of the absent person feels right.

For more ideas on how to navigate the holidays and other difficult firsts, visit the Grief & Loss pages at www.frederickhealthhospice.org.



Children and Grief: A Summary

Remember

- ❖ Children grieve very differently than adults. Grief expression will vary and is dependent on a number of factors.
- ❖ Children can sustain intense emotions for only a short period of time.
- ❖ Best predictor of children's coping is parent or guardian's coping.
- ❖ Remember that "acting out" behaviors may be a child's expression of grief.

Dos and Don'ts

Do...

- ❖ Be very open with your own emotions- "I'm very sad."
- ❖ Be explicit about why you feel as you do- "I'm very sad because Grandma died."
- ❖ Be specific about why the death occurred- "Grandma died of a disease called cancer."
- ❖ Be short on word answers and long on hugs of assurance.
- ❖ Include children of all ages in the family rituals, new traditions, and remembrance activities.
- ❖ Allow children to grieve at their own pace and in their own way.

Don't...

- ❖ Push the conversation. Allow children to direct the conversation.
- ❖ Talk too much. Answer only the question a child asks.
- ❖ Try to do your child's mourning for them. You won't succeed.
- ❖ Pass off the child's fears as inappropriate. They are real.
- ❖ Pretend that nothing significant has happened.
- ❖ Try to "protect" the child by keeping things from him/her or by hiding your own emotions.
- ❖ Change the role of the child – "Now you must be a good boy and help Daddy around the house."
- ❖ Speak beyond a child's level of understanding.

A Final Note

We hope that this booklet has been helpful and encouraging to you. Although talking to grieving children and adolescents is difficult and frightening, you truly do have all of the tools you need – and with them, the ability to make a lasting impact through simply sharing information in a timely and honest way, allowing them to make the choices that feel right for them wherever possible, being available to talk (or hug!), and by reassuring them that they are still going to be loved and cared for. Children are resilient and adaptable, and if supported and given the right tools, most children and adolescents grieve healthily and go on to have happy and loving lives and relationships.

We also want to recognize that if you are reading this, you have also probably just said goodbye, or are preparing to say goodbye, to someone that you love very much. Trying to support a grieving child while you are also grieving can be extremely difficult. While we might want to “protect” our children from seeing us upset, allowing them to see us grieve gives them permission to grieve, too. Likewise, asking for help and support when we need it encourages them to also ask for help and support when they need it.

Please know that the Frederick Health Hospice Bereavement Team is here to support you in any way we can. Our support services are available to anyone in our community at no cost. We offer individual grief counseling (up to 8 sessions), support groups, workshops, and grief camps. Call us at 240-566-3030 or visit www.frederickhealthhospice.org for more information.



Resources for Parents and Children

Frederick Health Hospice

1 Frederick Health Way, Frederick, MD 21701

240-566-3030

Bereavement Support Services

- Short-term grief counseling for adults, adolescents, and children age 6+ at no cost; no insurance needed
- Camp Jamie child grief camp offered bi-annually (May and September)
- Consultations and referrals to specialized resources

Helpful books for children

- How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness: Supportive, Practical Advice from a Leading Child Life Specialist, *by Kathleen McCue M.A. C.C.L.S. and Ron Bonn*
- My Parent Has Cancer and It Really Sucks, *by Marc Silver and Maya Silver*
- A Terrible Thing Happened, *by Margaret M. Holmes*
- The Memory Box, *by Joanna Rowland*
- The Invisible String, *by Patrice Karst*
- I Miss You, *by Pat Thomas*
- The Fall of Freddie the Leaf, *by Leo Buscaglia*
- The Goodbye Book, *by Todd Parr*
- Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, *by Bryan Mellonie*
- The Funeral (the process of a funeral), *by Matt James*
- Tear Soup, *by Chuck Schwiebert*
- I Have a Question About Death, *by Arlen Grad Gaines*
- Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids: 100 Practical Ideas (Healing Your Grieving Heart series), *by Alan D. Wolfelt*
- Talking about Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child, *by Earl A. Grollman*
- Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals, *by Earl A. Grollman*



Online Resources

- What's Your Grief (www.whatsyourgrief.com): supportive articles, activities.
- Frederick Health Hospice (www.frederickhealthhospice.org) : information of grief support services, Camp Jamie, and larger list of books for talking with children and teens about death.
- Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families (www.dougy.org)
- National Alliance for Grieving Children (<https://childrengrieve.org/>)
- Hello Grief (www.hellogrief.com) :Blog for kids
- The App- A part of me- an interactive App related to loss & grief that provides young people with a safe space to grieve, where they can hear from others who know how it feels.
- The App- GriefSteps- this is for parents, it a free and easily accessible mobile and web-based resource with useful information and activities for bereaved families.
- A child in Grief (www.achildingrief.org) : full color books

