

Supporting Children

Through Grief and Loss



UC DAVIS
HEALTH

CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL



Foreword

Please accept our condolences and know that this guide was created to support you and your family through this difficult time. As you move forward, you may have questions or concerns about the grief process for yourself, your children, or other family members and friends. This booklet is intended to help you as you support those close to you after the death of a loved one.

Definitions

Grief is unique to each person and a normal response to processing loss. It can affect the entire sense of self (mind, body, spirit, and emotion).

Mourning is the outward expression of grief, including memorial services, funerals, etc. Some of this expression will be specific to each culture.

Bereavement is the period after a loss when grief and mourning occurs.

Loss is the death of a loved one.

Caregivers can be any caring adults in a child's life, including but not limited to family members, teachers, coaches, childcare providers, and neighbors.

Coping is the process of managing a difficult time in your life.

Grounding exercises are techniques to interrupt anxious thoughts and bring the focus into the present moment.

Validating feelings is recognizing how someone feels. "You feel _____, right now – it's normal to feel this way."

Introduction

When someone close to you has died, it can be overwhelming and confusing. Feeling this way may make the idea of supporting children or teens in your life seem extremely hard. Throughout this booklet, we will share how to discuss the loss, common reactions, and supportive activities that can help children of different ages cope.

Please use this booklet as it works best for you and your family, reading some sections now and others when appropriate. It is by no means all-inclusive. There are many added resources available for understanding the grieving process and supporting children as they navigate change and loss. You may share this resource with other important and caring adults in your child's life such as family members, teachers, coaches, or childcare providers.

The First Few Days

Sharing the news with children

Conversations with children about death can be incredibly hard. Staying open, honest, and as clear as possible is best and there are a few other things you'll want to keep in mind.

Pre-conversation:

- Get the help of a partner when you are sharing the news. You can lean on each other for support.
- Think about the developmental age of your child or teen. This will help you know how many details to include in the conversation (typically, less for younger children and more for older children).
- If there are big differences in the age or temperament of your children, it may be best to talk separately.
- Have the conversation during a time in the day when they can switch from the conversation to a calm and enjoyable activity. Before bedtime would not be a suitable time for this conversation.

- Supplies to have on hand: water, tissues, and a few play items for children to use for stress relief

Children of all ages experience the feelings related with loss and separation. However, children under five typically do not have a concept of death or do not view death as permanent. Generally, understanding of the differences between living and dying appears between the ages of 6 and 8, and becomes clearer over time.

Conversation – explaining death to children:

- Begin the conversation with, “There is something important I’d like to talk with you about.”
- Ask your child or teen what they know or understand about the situation. This will help begin the conversation.
- Review the story, “_____ has been sick for a long time. The doctors have told us that there aren’t any medicines or treatments that can help their body work any longer. When the body stops working, it dies.” It’s important to use clear words like “death” and “dying” and avoid unclear terms like “gone to sleep” or “we’ve lost them,” as these can confuse children.
- Explain the finality of death. “When the body stops working, it’s not able to keep the heart beating, the lungs breathing, and a person no longer sees, smells, eats, or thinks.”
- If it is important for your family to share religious or spiritual beliefs about death with your child, you may want to speak with your faith leader or spiritual advisor for further guidance, as needed.

What if...

- Your child becomes very emotional. Put your focus on supporting your child and come back to the conversation at a later time. It may be helpful to break up the conversation into smaller meetings.



- You don’t have all of the answers. Saying “I don’t know the answer to that question right now, but if I do at some point, I will let you know” is perfectly acceptable.

It can be helpful to validate how uncomfortable the unknown can be.

When the loved one has an illness for a long time, there may be more time to spread out information sharing and support. In other situations, the death is sudden. These may call for different approaches.

Long-term illness

With an extended period of illness, you have been grieving the losses along the way, and that can be overwhelming. You may have been able to talk about the loved one’s worsening health throughout the process and the death may not be as shocking for the child. It is not uncommon for children to feel relieved by some aspects of the death. For example, maybe they can once again do some things that had been sidelined by the loved one’s many needs at home, or their frequent hospitalizations. Normalizing this for children can be helpful as they may feel a sense of guilt about this.

Sudden death

A sudden loss can be extremely unsettling for children, and it is not uncommon for fears to develop: Will someone else in the family die? Will they themselves die? It can be helpful to validate how uncomfortable the unknown can be while also supporting the conversation with coping ideas and emphasizing how they will continue to be cared for, always. Think about using this framework, “we do the best we can to take care of ourselves so that we can live a healthy life and although we don’t know what tomorrow will hold, I expect us to be together for a long time.”

A Developmental Perspective

For reference, here is an age-to-age breakdown regarding a child's typical understanding of death, common reactions, what to say or do, and ideas about how to support coping.

Infants and toddlers (Birth to 2 years)			
Typical understanding of death	Common Reactions to Death	What to say or do	How to support coping
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited understanding of death but can often feel caregivers' emotions, separation, and loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased crying, fussiness, or clinginess Changes in eating and sleeping patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance sense of security by keeping routines consistent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide physical comfort (hugging and holding)
Preschool (3 to 5 years)			
Typical understanding of death	Common Reactions to Death	What to say or do	How to support coping
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sees death as reversible May think their own unrelated actions caused death Takes common phrases such as "passed away," "lost," "gone to sleep," or "in a better place" literally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows little concern at times Difficulty separating from caregivers May worry about own security Regressive behaviors such as bedwetting, baby talk, fear of the dark Talks about or asks frequent questions about death and dying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide comfort and closeness Prepare child for what's to come Enhance sense of security by keeping routines consistent, especially bookends of the day Give choices when possible Set limits to help child know what is expected of them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide opportunities for play as a coping tool for when they need a break from the heaviness of grief Create a reading corner with age-appropriate books and comforting items such as blankets, pillows, and pictures and mementos of the loved one



School-age (6 to 12 years)			
Typical understanding of death	Common Reactions to Death	What to say or do	How to support coping
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starts to understand that death is permanent May not understand that death happens for everyone May think the death was caused by something they did, said, or thought about May ask detailed questions about death and what happens after 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide range of emotions: sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, withdrawal Physical complaints such as headache or upset stomach Nightmares or trouble sleeping Difficulty focusing on or trouble with schoolwork Denial of death May show strong emotions mixed with moments of play as if nothing has happened 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In addition to suggestions for preschool years: Explain that all grief reactions are okay and that there is no correct way to grieve Listen intently and encourage the child to share their feelings openly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide opportunities for play as a coping tool for when they need a break from the heaviness of grief Encourage the child to express themselves through an outlet that feels most comfortable for them, including art, journaling, talking, music, or physical activity Create a cozy corner with blankets, pillows, books, and mementos of the loved one Encourage child's attendance at the funeral or burial process
Adolescence (12+ years)			
Typical understanding of death	Common Reactions to Death	What to say or do	How to support coping
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands that death is permanent and may worry about the impact on themselves and others May question the meaning of life and wonder why bad things happen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May have difficulty talking about the death or their feelings to family and friends May seek support from peers or mentors outside their immediate family Changes in eating and sleeping patterns Increased risk-taking, including unsafe driving, experimentation with alcohol, drugs, and sex, or giving in to peer pressure Wanting or feeling pressured to take on more adult responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen and acknowledge without offering solutions or "trying to fix" Encourage communication Give choices when possible Set realistic expectations Seek professional support if you have concerns for self-harm or suicidal ideation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage the child to express themselves through an outlet that feels most comfortable for them, including art, journaling, talking, music, or physical activity Encourage child's attendance at the funeral or burial process Create a comfortable space with blankets, pillows, books, and mementos of the loved one

Strategies to help for children of all ages

Change can be hard for everyone, and it is important to communicate that to your child or teen. Emphasize that your family will get through this time together and that they will still be cared for and loved.



Here are some more ideas that may be helpful as you continue to support your child during this difficult time.

- **Open up.** Sharing how you feel can help your child know that it's okay to share their feelings. It's okay to let your child see you cry or even cry together.
- **Listen and watch.** Let your child's questions, artwork, play, and other expressions help guide your conversations. Some questions that may come up are "Who will take care of me?" "Why did _____ have to die?" and "Am I going to die?" Continue to validate their feelings and maintain honesty using phrasing similar to, "all living things die, although usually after a long life of living."
- **Provide comfort.** Although you may not be able to take the sadness away, providing comfort helps foster a sense of security.
- **Maintain honesty.** Answering questions, listening actively, and validating your child's feelings can help provide the reassurance they need. Being honest about what you don't know is part of this process as well.
- **Maintain routines.** Routines can help with your child's sense of security, especially during chaotic times. If you need to restructure some aspects of a routine, you can involve the child in that process. For example, if the loved one can no longer sing songs at bedtime, talk to the child about what they want to do instead, or if someone else should sing to them.

- **Be together.** Each child will be working through their experience in their own way. Being together will continue to provide connection and maintain your supportive bond.
- **Play.** Play, creative activities, and physical movement are important. They help children naturally express their feelings, concerns, and questions.

Preparing your child for what to expect

Children of all ages will notice changes in their environment after someone dies. It can be confusing for anyone, but especially for younger children who rely on consistent routines to help them feel safe and secure. You can help your child remain grounded by describing, in honest and developmentally appropriate ways, what to expect over the next few days.

- **Let your child know that there may be extra visitors.** Answer questions as they arise about who will be coming and going and how visitors might be acting (e.g., crying, sad, or silent).
- **Explain the plan for the next few days,** reviewing the ceremony arrangements (for example, funeral, memorial service, and burial or cremation). If they are given a choice of whether to go and they decline, plan for who will be taking care of them during this time and any other time you will not be with them.
- **Help your child feel included** in what is going on, offering them choices to participate in any activities.
- **Together with the child, think about when it will be helpful for them to go back to school.** There are many factors to consider and organizing with the school will be important.
- **From the beginning, ensure that your child's questions, concerns, and needs are heard.** Children may ask questions again and again, especially about things that are hard to say or hard to think about. It can be helpful to set aside a time each day for questions and conversations regarding the death of the loved one.

Children attending funerals

Joining in ceremonies gives young children and teens a chance to process what happened, continue to grieve, and say goodbye. The child should be invited – not forced – to attend the funeral or memorial service. To help them decide whether to go, it is important to explain who will be there, what is going to happen, where the service will take place, when the funeral will happen, and why there is going to be a service. Ensure there is an adult able to help the child exit from the service at any point as needed, and especially afterwards.



If the child is feeling nervous or chooses not to go, encourage them to honor their loved one in other ways that are meaningful and symbolic of saying goodbye from afar. For example, you could help the child draw a picture, write a letter, leave a special item with the person, make a photo collage of the family or loved one, make a playlist of the loved one's favorite songs, or write a poem to be read at the memorial.

Looking Forward

As time moves on, you will continue to develop strategies to cope with your emotions related to your grief. Allow your feelings to happen without judgment and without comparing your grief to someone else's. Rather, it may be helpful to compare where you are at in your grief process to where you were in the past. You may even begin to experience moments when you briefly forget your sadness. Sometimes these "grief breaks" are accompanied by guilt, but they are a natural part of the grieving process. Give yourself and your children permission to feel happy again, knowing that you will never forget your loved one and that their memory will live on in the hearts of your family and those close to them.



Coping activities and memorializing your loved one

Coping may depend on a child's stage of development, temperament, natural interests, and unique experiences related to the grief process. Creative activities can help you and your child process and express emotions related to the loss of your loved one, develop coping skills, and honor their memory. In grief, it can be difficult for children to understand their feelings, and nonverbal outlets (movement, play, art, and music) can be extremely helpful. This process can bring comfort, encourage sharing, and create a long-lasting reminder of the relationship you shared. Here are some ideas that can be used for children or teens, as appropriate. For additional activities, please visit our website: ucdavis.health/childliferesources.

Self-expression

- **Create a "mailbox"** or jar where children can write (or draw) any questions/comments/feelings they are having on a piece of paper.
- **Encourage journaling.** Starting with a prompt can be helpful (e.g., If I could change things, I would..., After the death, school has been...).
- **Create a family scrapbook** with special pictures and mementos.

Grounding

- Take ten **slow breaths** using pinwheels or bubbles to practice deep breathing can be helpful for younger children.
- **Engage** the senses and bring attention to:
 - 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can hear
 - 3 things you can touch
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste





Movement

- **Dance** to music.
- **Stomp on the ground** or on bubble wrap.
- **Rip up some paper** or throw soft wet objects – for example, paper, sponges, or balloons – at an outside wall.
- **Offer stretching** or yoga.

Remembering

- Carry in your pocket a small memento that reminds you of your loved one.
- Plant a tree or flower or bury a time capsule.
- Create a special area in your home to honor your loved one with photos, drawings, and items to remember them by.
- Create a memory box to store special keepsakes in.

Signs of healing, signs of need

Children are resilient. With time, support, and tools to promote coping, most children will return to their typical level of functioning after a death. However, in some cases, especially if a child has other issues or challenges in their life, they may be at risk for greater effects from the loss, such as depression or anxiety. If you notice *ongoing behaviors* that interfere with a child's daily life, seek the support of a child and adolescent mental health professional.

Possible signs that your child is needing professional support include:

- Loses interest in daily activities and events
- Withdrawal from friends
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, loss of appetite, or a prolonged fear of being alone
- Regression to an earlier stage of development
- A drop in school performance or refusal to attend school
- Excessive play representing the deceased loved one
- Repeated statements about wanting to join the deceased

To check in with a child, consider starting a conversation in one of these ways:

- You seem really _____ these days. Tell me about how you are feeling inside. [Or:] Tell me what kinds of things you are thinking about.
- How do you feel when _____?

Preparing for milestones and anniversaries

It is important to keep in mind that holidays and milestones may be different now that your loved one has died. Acknowledging this with your child can prepare them for the difficult emotions they may experience and validate their grief. It may be helpful to create a plan for how to honor or celebrate anniversaries such as the loved one's birthday, death day, and so on – this could be a small act or ritual, a big event, or just sitting together and sharing memories of your loved one. You can light a candle on special days. You can celebrate the loved one's birthday by making and eating their favorite meal or looking through photos together.

Taking care of yourself

Aim to find sources of support for yourself to help address and manage the feelings you are having. With a self-care plan in place, you may feel better equipped to support your child in their grief process. Research suggests that how well a child does after a death depends to some extent on how well the adults around them are doing. This means staying open with your feelings and finding sources of comfort and inspiration in your own life. Active use of tools for support will help you be present for your child, and perhaps also model for your child how they can take care of themselves.

If you feel that anywhere along your journey with grief you need support for yourself or your child, you may consider a variety of resources: trusted friends, individuals who know your family well, medical practitioners, local or national agencies that are trained in helping grieving individuals and families, or religious or spiritual settings. You can seek individual therapy and services, or more outward connections through support groups or camps. Please

see recommended books below and visit our child life webpage:

[ucdavis.health/childliferesources](https://www.ucdavis.edu/health/childliferesources) for additional resources, organizations and camps that may add another layer of support.



BOOKS



All ages

- *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, by Bryan Mellonie
- *The Next Place*, by Warren Hanson
- *The Invisible String*, by Patrice Karst
- *Wherever You Are My Love Will Find You*, by Nancy Tillman
- *The Memory Box: A Book about Grief*, by Joanna Rowland
- *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*, by The Dougy Center

Younger children (3 - 6 years):

- *I Miss You: A First Look at Death*, by Pat Thomas
- *The Goodbye Book*, by Todd Parr
- *We Were Gonna Have a Baby, But We Had an Angel Instead*, by Pat Schwiebert (for newborn loss)

School-age (7 - 12 years)

- *Help Me Say Goodbye (workbook)*, by Janis Silverman
- *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies*, by Trevor Romain

Teenagers (12+ years)

- *Helping Teens Cope with Death*, by The Dougy Center
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas*, by Alan D. Wolfelt



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For more information, please visit: ucdavis.health/childlife

The Child Life and Creative Arts Therapy Department supports coping through prioritizing psychosocial needs of patients and families. We encourage and protect unconditional emotional safety, especially in times of hardship.



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