

# *When Children Grieve*



*This guide is prepared in loving memory of  
individuals and families who chose to give the gift of life  
to others, even in the midst of their own tragic loss.*

*We hope this resource provides assistance  
and comfort after the loss of a loved one,  
when families can feel overwhelmed and lost.*

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## *Supporting Children Through Grief*

Despite our best attempts to shield children from death, they are exposed to it almost daily. Children see and hear about death through cartoons, television shows, videos, news and nature, through the death of insects and animals. Providing children with honest information about death in a consistent manner may help them begin to cope with the loss of a loved one. Children of all ages need support and love after the death of a family member.

- Children, in many instances, learn from the behaviors of those around them. Be open and honest about your feelings with children as they may experience those same feelings and realize it is okay to experience them.
- Common reactions to grief include anger, denial, fear and guilt. Children may display these feelings by acting out, clinging to a loved one, or withdrawing from family and/or friends or by demonstrating regressive behaviors such as reverting back to an earlier stage of development.
- The death of a loved one will generally interrupt a child's normal routine, yet a consistent schedule may help reduce their stress. This could include chores, homework, bedtime routines, recreational sports or time with peers.
- The death of a loved one may cause confusion about his/her role within the family. Reassure the child of his/her continued importance to the family unit.
- Use simple language and avoid common phrases that are often used to refer to death but may cause unintended confusion. "He/She is sleeping," may result in a child's fear of going to sleep. "Gone on" or "left us" could imply that the deceased person went on a trip and result in a child's fear that another loved one might never return from a trip. "He/She was so special, God wanted him/her to be with Him" could make a child wonder why he/she wasn't special enough for God to want them. It could also make a child fear that God will take him/her away in death at any time. It is important to use words such as "dead" and "died."

- Children may use the word “dead” without knowing what it means. Simple explanations can be very helpful, such as, “when a person is dead they do not eat, sleep, feel, breathe, walk or play.”
- A child may feel guilty about the death of a loved one. Reassure the child that he/she did not cause the death by thinking, wishing or saying anything—good or bad—about the deceased person.
- Children express themselves through play; adults may better understand how the death impacts the children as a result of observing their play, and can act to support them as necessary.
- Allow children to choose if they want to attend and/or participate in the funeral or memorial service. If the answer is no, explore other ways to involve them through pictures, videos, letters or a balloon release.
- Share your own memories of your loved one with the child. Remember happy occasions or big events with your loved one. This demonstrates that it is okay to be happy and laugh, even in a time of great sorrow.
- As children grow older, their understanding of death changes and adults can discuss death in an age-appropriate manner.





## *Tips For Age Appropriate Communication With Children About Death*

### **Birth to Age 3**

Infants and toddlers learn and grow quickly. Although infants and toddlers do not understand death, they can be affected by changes in their lives.

#### **Common Reactions to Loss:**

- Changes in eating habits.
- Changes in sleeping habits.
- Greater difficulty separating from loved ones, increased clinginess.
- May appear to be sad and express their sadness through play.
- Demonstrate regressive behavior such as wanting a pacifier or having accidents if he/she is newly potty trained.

#### **Tips for Adults to Help the Infant or Toddler-Aged Child**

- Maintain routines and schedules when possible.
- Maintain consistent and familiar caregivers.
- Allow toddlers to express feelings through play.
- Find time to show affection such as hugging, rocking and playing.
- Continue to give consistent answers to questions regarding the death; these answers may have to be repeated. Avoid using words such as “gone away” or “gone to sleep” when explaining death.
- Support the child and keep in mind the regressive behaviors are temporary.

## Ages 3 to 5

Children in this age range may not fully understand death, however they will understand a different family routine. They may not respond to the death of a person unless it was their primary caregiver.

### Common Reactions to Loss:

- Regressive behavior, such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking.
- Guilt, because a child may think he caused the death or he may feel responsible for not having been “good” in some way.
- Express grief or sadness through make-believe or fantasy play.
- Change in sleeping habits.
- Repeatedly ask when the deceased person will return; since a preschooler may not understand the finality of death or the concept of time.
- Clingy and worry about who will take care of him/her.
- Demonstrate aggressive behaviors or increased whining.

### Tips For Adults to Help the Pre-School Aged Child:

- Support the child and keep in mind that regressive behaviors are temporary.
- Reassure the child that he/she did not cause the death. It is important to explain the cause of death using simple words. Examples include: the person died because their body stopped working or the person died because he was injured very badly. We do not recommend telling a child that the person died because they were sick; a child may worry that anyone who becomes sick will automatically die.
- Provide information at the child's pace. It is okay if he/she does not want to talk about the loved one's death right away. Children often ask questions as they need more information.
- Create a time for sharing and talking each day. This could be during dinner, before nap time or story time, or bed.
- Provide time for the child to play with toys, books, crayons or paints to help the child express his/her feelings and grief.
- Correct misconceptions you may hear the child say about death of the loved one. Keep the information honest and simple (avoid using big words).

- Let the child see you express your emotions and help him/her identify these emotions, then explore ways for him/her to express the emotions safely. For example, if the child is angry, offer play dough for pounding, blocks for knocking down or paper for tearing.
- Let the child know that you love him/her. Use reassuring words, for example, "Our family is going to be okay, but we are very sad because we miss Daddy so much."
- Inform teachers and childcare providers of the loved one's death because they can help identify changes in behavior.

## Ages 6 to 12

Elementary school aged children begin to understand the irreversibility of death. Younger children may try to keep the relationship alive while older children have a more mature understanding of the finality of death.

### Common Reactions to Loss:

- May view death as contagious.
- Some may believe their words, thoughts or actions caused the death.
- Fear the death of a parent, caregiver, themselves or other loved ones. They may also fear how the death impacts the family as a whole. Children may worry about family finances or other responsibilities after losing a caregiver.
- Demonstrate regressive behavior or behavior changes including: withdrawal, aggression, anger or poor school performance.
- Ask specific questions about the death: How did he/she die? What happened to him/her?
- Require repeated explanations to help them understand what happened and why.
- Experience changes in eating patterns.
- Experience a preoccupation with morbid thoughts.
- Lack focus in school resulting in poor grades.



## **Tips for Adults to Help the School-Aged Child:**

- Provide open and honest communication about the death of the loved one; be available to answer questions about the death.
- Identify, address and normalize the child's fears. Assure the child that he/she is safe.
- Reassure the child that he/she did not cause the death. It is important to explain the cause of death using simple words. For example: Daddy's body was injured from the accident. The doctors tried to help Daddy's body work better, but he was so injured the doctors couldn't help his body and the injuries from the accident made him die.
- Be prepared to answer questions such as "Who will do Daddy's job?" Children need to know who will fill the role of the person who died.
- Examples seen in nature may help the child identify with death. Birds, insects and pets that have died can be a starting point in explaining death.
- Provide physical and play outlets to help the child express his/her feelings and grief.
- Avoid phrases like "be brave," or "be a big boy/girl," and "don't worry." Let him/her know it is ok to cry, to be afraid and to be worried.
- Let the child see you express your emotions and help him/her identify these emotions. This will teach him/her it is ok to express the feelings he/she may experience. For example: "Daddy is crying because he is sad. He misses Mommy so very much."
- Avoid phrases like "God needed another angel," or "God took mommy to heaven." These phrases can cause confusion and the child may think God or another spiritual being will take him/her away from his family.
- Inform the child's teacher, school counselor and/or principal of the loved one's death. They can help identify changes in behaviors and school performance.
- Friends from school may share incorrect information with the child about death. Help the child identify someone at school they can talk to if they have questions or just need to talk.

## Teenagers


Most teenagers are capable of abstract thoughts. A teen typically understands that death is irreversible and it will eventually happen to everyone. However, a teen's reaction to death may vary.

### Common Reactions to Loss:

- Increased anger, irritability and sadness.
- Change in sleep patterns and/or eating habits.
- Questions religious beliefs, rituals and his/her view of an afterlife.
- Trouble focusing in school.
- Acting out or acting differently to hide his/her true feelings.
- May feel the need to take on the deceased person's role or responsibilities in the family (meals, childcare and finances).
- Has a tough time accepting help or admitting the need for help.
- Turns to peers for support instead of adults or family members.
- May feel self-conscious and isolated from peers because he/she is "different."
- Increased desire for independence or space.
- Feelings of guilt about the death or about recent interactions with the loved one prior to death.
- Difficulty in sharing feelings.
- Loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed.
- Denies the death occurred.
- May participate in risky behaviors, such as experimenting with alcohol or drugs. Some teens may have suicidal thoughts or experience increased anxiety. In any of these cases, we encourage you to seek professional counseling.

### Tips for Adults to Help the Teen:

- Provide open and honest communication about the death of the loved one.
- Help him/her understand the cause of death and reassure him/her the death was not their fault.
- Be patient. Feelings and reactions may be inconsistent and difficult to understand.

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- A butterfly with orange and black wings is perched on a green leaf. The leaf is covered in small, clear water droplets. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.
- Express your own feelings of grief. This can help the teen see that it is okay to experience and express different emotions.
  - Be aware that he/she may not want to show their feelings because of a concern that it will add stress for the adults or younger children in the family.
  - Validate feelings by letting him/her know it is ok to be sad, angry or mad.
  - Make yourself or another adult available for questions or to share thoughts. The teen may not want to talk with any adults, but it is helpful for him/her to know there are adults who care and are available when he/she decides they want to talk.
  - Encourage peer support and time away from adults.
  - Allow the teen to maintain a typical schedule and not be consumed by new adult responsibilities.
  - Inform the teen's teachers, school counselor and/or principal of the loved one's death. They can help identify changes in behavior and school performance.
  - Provide the teen with books or resources that may be helpful in coping with the death of a loved one.
  - Locate a support group if you both agree it could be helpful.
  - Allow the teen to grieve, but be aware of risky behaviors.
  - If you notice any significant behavior changes in your teen, please seek the professional advice of a counselor. They can identify behaviors that are not normal and suggest appropriate professional help.

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