

About Childhood Grief

by National Alliance for Grieving Children

The death of a family member, friend or other significant person is a lifelong loss for children. It is normal for children to miss the person who died and to experience grief that might come and go with different levels of intensity for some time after the death. It can be challenging to parents and caregivers to know what to do for, what to say to and how to help children who are obviously hurting. Here are a few suggestions about how to be helpful to a grieving child based on research and practice among children's grief support professionals and volunteers. It is important to note that grief reactions in children are varied, wide ranging and unique to each individual. The following suggestions will help guide you as you seek to provide understanding and compassion to children living with grief.

Grief is a normal reaction for children to the death of someone significant. When children experience the death of a person who has played a significant role in their life, it is normal for children to struggle, whether the relationship with that person was caring and loving, or contentious and difficult. The absence of a person takes time to fully accept and even then, children may continue to miss them in their own special way. In truth, children never "get over" a person's death, but they can learn to live with the reality. Grief is not a problem we are trying to fix for a child; it is an experience they are living. Mood changes or feelings of grief, even several years out from the event, are a common part of adapting to life without someone and to the changes that come with that person's death. Children need adults to be patient with them as they adjust to these changes.

Children need to know the truth. Most parents and caregivers would agree that they would prefer that their children not have to deal with the difficult truths that might accompany a death. So, quite often we avoid words like "dead" or "die," or we shade over the truth about how a person died in a desire to protect children. Unfortunately, in doing so, we often create other problems. Although it may be challenging to share the truth about how someone died, honest answers build trust, help provide understanding and allow children to feel comfortable approaching us with questions because they know they can trust us to tell them the truth. Children know more than we think they do and by not telling the truth, we risk leaving children to process complicated information on their own, rather than with the loving adults in their lives.

Each child's grief is as unique to him or her as was their relationship with the deceased. Because of this, the way children experience and express their grief will vary for each person. Some children have a need to talk about the person who died and their feelings about it; others might not talk about the person at all; and even others, might express their grief through art, play, music or writing. In whatever way children might experience and respond to their grief, these expressions are how they are adapting to life without the physical presence of that person and adjusting to one of memories. It is important not to assume what children might be feeling about a person's death. Reactions vary from sadness, anger, fear, guilt and even relief. It is important to listen to children, meet them on their terms and come to understand their unique grief reactions.



Grieving children often feel alone and misunderstood. Many well-meaning adults avoid talking about the deceased person in fear that doing so will exacerbate the grief children are experiencing. In doing so, children might feel as though talking about or even expressing their grief is not acceptable. Also, many children feel like they are the only person who has experienced the death of someone in their life, even though there might be other friends experiencing similar circumstances. It is helpful to children when the adults in their lives provide opportunities to acknowledge the grief everyone is feeling. It is also helpful when children are able to gather with peers grieving similar situations. When children feel understood by family and friends and when they have the opportunity to express their grief in their own unique way, they feel less alone and, in turn, fare better than they would otherwise.

Children will experience grief over the death of significant people at different times throughout their lives. Many times, intense feelings of grief will last longer and come more often than we think they should. In time, as children have opportunities to express their grief, tell their stories, share their memories and process what this death means to them, they might find the intense feelings come less often. But, grief is a lifelong journey and children often experience their grief on different levels and at different times throughout their lives. When a child gets their driver's license, scores a touchdown, goes to prom or graduates from high school, they might revisit their grief in a very intense way. This extends into adulthood as well, when they have children of their own, or get married. Grief has no time limit. Allowing children to share openly about feelings can help to normalize this experience and help them find ways to deal with these powerful feelings that will come and go...and come back again throughout their lives.

Grieving children often experience personal growth as a result of their loss. Personal growth is often a by-product of going through the grief. It is important to note that personal growth does not diminish the sense of loss or grief a person feels, nor does it imply that someone's death was a positive experience. Yet, many children have reported that they are more compassionate toward others, value relationships with friends and family on a new level or experience a greater sense of appreciation for life after the death of someone.

Grieving children feel less alone when they are with other children who have experienced the death of a significant person and when they have loving, consistent adults in their lives. Greater than any education, information or advice we can give to children who are grieving is to allow children who are grieving to connect with other children going through a similar experience. When children have the opportunity to interact with one another, they feel less alone. It is also important for children to have adults in their lives who provide a safe environment that is consistent, teaches resilience and encourages accountability, while allowing children the freedom to express their grief. Research has shown that one of the top indicators of how well children will do after the death of a significant person in their life is directly related to the type of relationship they have with the surviving adult(s) in their lives and how well these adults are able to cope with their own grief.

Knowledge is Power. You do not have to be alone as the parent or caregiver of a grieving child. There are many resources available via the internet and in the form of grief support for your child.



You can find children's grief support programs near you at www.ChildrenGrieve.org and you can find encouragement and answers to some of your questions at the following websites:

www.dougy.org

www.hellogrief.org

www.achildgrief.com

www.lorysplace.org

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