

For Parents: Children and Grief: Information for Families



What You Should Know

Like adults, children and teens may feel intense sadness and loss when a person close to them dies. And, like adults, children and teens express their grief—both emotionally and physically—in their actions, their words, and their thoughts. Each child and parent grieves differently, and there is no right or wrong way or length of time to grieve.

Children may show their grief in these ways:

- Sleeping or crying more than usual
- Regressing—returning to earlier behaviors (sucking thumbs, baby talk, wetting the bed)
- Developing new fears or problems in school
- Complaining about aches and pains
- Becoming angry and irritable
- Withdrawing and isolating themselves from family and friends

Grieving children may behave in ways that don't seem connected to sadness or grief. A usually quiet toddler may have more tantrums, or an active child may lose interest in things he/she used to do. A studious teen may engage in risky behavior. Whatever a child's age, he/she may feel guilty about having caused the death (even when he/she did not). Sometimes grieving children take on the role of an adult, worrying about their surviving parent. They may wonder about who will care for them if they lose that parent as well.

Children having normal grief reactions will do things that help them adapt to the death and to life without that person. Young children may act out the story of the event in their play. Older children and teens may create rituals to mourn or honor the person. Typically the normal grief process helps children to:

- Accept the reality and permanence of the death
- Experience and cope with painful reactions to the death, such as sadness, anger, resentment, confusion, and guilt
- Adjust to changes in their lives and their role in the family that result from the death
- Develop new relationships or deepen existing relationships as a way to cope with the difficulties and loneliness resulting from the loss
- Find new life-affirming activities as a way to move forward
- Maintain a continuing, appropriate attachment to the person who died through such activities as reminiscing, remembering, and memorializing
- Make meaning of the death, perhaps coming to an understanding of why the person died
- Continue through the normal developmental stages of childhood and adolescence

When children have lost a loved one suddenly, they may experience “traumatic grief,” where the shock of the death creates trauma symptoms that interfere with the child's ability to work through the typical grieving process. Even happy thoughts of the deceased person remind children of the traumatic way he/she died. Other features of traumatic grief include:

- Intruding memories about the death—nightmares, feeling guilty, self-blame, or thoughts about the horrible way the person died.
- Signs of avoiding and numbing—pulling away, acting as if not upset, and avoiding reminders of the person, the way he/she died, or the event that led to the death.
- Physical or emotional symptoms of increased arousal (being “stirred up”)—irritability, anger, trouble sleeping, poor concentration, drop in grades, stomachaches, headaches, increased vigilance (watchfulness), and fears about their own safety or that of others.

What Can Help

- **Provide a sense of security.** Whenever you have to go somewhere, tell children what time you will return, and do come back at that time. Keep to your family routines and activities. Keep calm by remembering that your child’s misbehavior may be related to grief.
- **Be patient.** Children’s behavior and needs may be more challenging, especially when you are grieving yourself. Remember to look for and praise good behavior and give extra hugs.
- **Pay attention to words and behaviors.** Listen to what your children say to you. Because some children can’t talk about what they are going through, watch for changes in behavior and listen for physical complaints.
- **Encourage expression of feeling.** Suggest drawing, writing, playing, acting, and talking. Describe to children the thoughts and feelings that they are showing by their behavior, so they can learn the words. Don’t be afraid of sad or angry feelings, but do set limits on unsafe behaviors.
- **Know that grief reactions may interact with other feelings and behaviors.** Each child has his/her own way of grieving. It might not be clear whether a behavior is about his/her grief or something else. If reactions or behavior become more intense or continue over time, seek additional help.

Take Care of Yourself

- **Get enough sleep, exercise, and time for yourself.** You must take care of yourself in order to take care of your children. It reassures children that you plan to stay healthy. When you model self-care, you help them learn to take good care of themselves, too.
- **Keep caring, familiar, and important adults around.** Grandparents, relatives, special friends, and neighbors can support you and provide caring stability and the “fun” and attention that your children may be craving.
- **Model healthy coping.** Children often take their cues about how to react from the adults they see. If you are sad or upset in front of your children, that’s okay. Explain briefly that grownups feel sad, too. Then show children through your words and actions that, even when you’re upset, you are able to manage your feelings and take care of them.
- **Seek counseling.** Parents and caregivers sometimes feel as though they should handle everything on their own. Experiencing the death of a loved one is extraordinarily painful—even overwhelming—and doesn’t necessarily get better on its own. Seek the advice, guidance, and support of people who know about grief and can answer your questions about what you going through, so you can support your children in what they are going through.