

Helping Kids to Understand Death and Supporting Their Grief



The death of an important person is difficult for the whole family. Often when a child has experienced the death of someone close to them, the adults in their life are unsure how to talk about the death and do not know what will be most helpful in the following days, weeks and months. Below are some suggestions for talking with and supporting a child who is grieving a death loss.

Be honest and truthful. As difficult as it is to discuss death with a child, it is important not to avoid the conversation as children will have an awareness that something significant has happened in their family. Children need open communication and honest information about the death for them to understand and make sense of what they are experiencing. Withholding information from a child can increase anxiety and erode trust. Providing honest and truthful information that is developmentally appropriate is the first step in supporting their grieving.

Avoid euphemisms. Children, especially young children, are very concrete in their thinking. For example, if told that a person who died has “gone to sleep” the child may believe that when they themselves or other family members go to sleep, they will not wake up. To reduce confusion for the child, it is important to use clear, truthful, age appropriate language.

It’s okay not to have all the answers. In discussions with children about death, there may be a variety of questions that arise, from how or why the person died, to the spiritual aspects of death and an afterlife. Part of being honest about death is being honest about the things we don’t know. It’s okay not to have all the answers.

Include children in mourning rituals. Many parents are unsure as to whether children should attend funerals, visitations, burials, etc. Participating in mourning rituals give children the opportunity to say good-bye and can help them to begin to understand death, for it to feel real. Sometimes it is even comforting for children to be able to leave a letter or special object with the person who has died. If unsure, ask the child and give them the choices about how participate. It can be good to have a plan in place for other family members to provide support and attend to the children during the ritual.

Grief is a lifelong process. We do not “get over” grief. It is something we eventually learn to accept and find a place for in our lives. Children will grieve and re-grieve with each developmental stage, transition or significant life change and it is not unusual to see grief re-surface over time. Children will continue to need support as the death takes on new meaning for them.

Children grieve differently from adults. Grief is as unique as we are. Children grieve in their own way. A child’s emotions and behaviour may change minute to minute as they move in and out of grief moments. Expect and accept a range of emotions and encourage safe and appropriate outlets for these expressions. Seek out advice from a professional if you have concerns that the loss is affecting the child’s daily functioning.

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Talk about the person who died. All too often children tell us that, as time passes, they have fewer and fewer opportunities to talk about the person who died. Children usually want to remember and talk about the person as it helps keep them alive in their memory.

Create rituals and memorialize. Creating rituals to remember the person who died provides children a way to continue a relationship with their special person after death. Although birthdays, anniversaries and holidays can be especially difficult times for grieving families, they can provide positive opportunities for rituals of remembrance.

Be aware of the impact of additional losses. Secondary losses can compound grief. These may include loss of friends, school, home and community and/or loss of lifestyle. Other death losses or even a pet loss can further complicate a child's grief.

Parents need support too. The best way for parents to support grieving children is to take care of themselves. Taking time to care for oneself physically, mentally and emotionally will help a parent have the energy to support the grieving child. This includes the parent allowing themselves to grieve and accepting support from others.

Suggested Reading:

[When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death](#) by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown

[I Miss You: A First Look At Death](#) by Pat Thomas

[Where Are You?: A Child's Book About Loss](#) by Laura Olivieri

[Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children](#) by Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen

[Healing a Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas For Families, Friends and Caregivers](#)
by Alan D. Wolfelt, PH. D

If there is a child in your life who is grieving a significant death loss and you have questions, concerns or would like to discuss a plan for supporting the child, The Lighthouse offers free telephone consultations. 905.337.2333.

