

GRIEF IN CHILDREN AND TEENS



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it's about life

Childhood is often viewed as a time of innocence, so it is especially hard for children and teens when a parent, sibling, or other close family member dies. Yet, in the United States, one in 14 children loses a parent or sibling by the age of 18*.

This booklet is written for family caregivers to provide education and guidance on how to support young people during times of loss. The booklet offers general information for kids and teens as well. Some of this information will apply to your life and some may not.

We hope you can use these resources to empower yourself through this grief journey and facilitate your healing as a family.

– The Mission Hospice & Home Care team

* National Alliance for Grieving Children



CHILDREN AND GRIEF

It is said that grief is a form of love. Children love deeply, and they grieve as much as adults do when there is a separation from a loved one. Yet they may not have the language or life experience to express their grief like adults.

As children develop, their understanding of death changes. Younger children, generally under seven years, are “concrete thinkers” and may not understand abstract thoughts like the afterlife or how a loss impacts us into the future. Kids need honest, age-appropriate explanations about death and grief. They need to know it’s not their fault and that they were still deeply loved by the parent or other loved one who died. They need to know it’s okay to ask questions and that adults will listen to them and answer honestly.

Sometimes children may show physical discomfort, such as having headaches or stomachaches, more often than expressing emotions of grief. Children may need to express themselves through play, creative art, or physical activities instead of words. Physical affection and hugs can provide tremendous solace to children.

BASIC FACTS FOR CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

- Death is irreversible and permanent (the person who has died is not “on a trip” or “sleeping”). One can use the words “died” and “dead” and not words like “gone,” as a child may be confused by ambiguity and mistakenly think that a loved one has gone on a trip and abandoned them, rather than having the opportunity to begin to understand the permanence of the death of a physical body.
- All living things die.
- All living functions end completely at the time of death.
- There are real physical reasons why we die.
- Death is not contagious.

EVERY FAMILY MEMBER GRIEVES DIFFERENTLY

As you embark on your own grief path, it is important to understand that everyone in your family grieves in their own unique way. Some need to talk about it and cry together. Some need privacy and personal space to allow this loss to be absorbed. Some need to avoid the pain and find ways to escape. Talking to each other about your needs can help you understand each other and bring your family closer. Discussing personal, religious, or spiritual beliefs can help children maintain a continuing bond to their loved one who died. Sometimes it might seem like your child is fine. With grief, it is okay to be okay. Even as time passes, it is important to still ask them about their feelings about the loss and to talk about the person who died.

WHAT GRIEVING KIDS NEED

- To have their loss acknowledged and to be included in the family grieving process
- To learn to name feelings and be allowed to express their feelings without shame
- To learn coping skills to help manage stress that comes with grief and change
- To learn tools to foster communication with you, the caregiver, other adults, and peers
- To be allowed to remember the person who died and find ways to connect with them, symbolically and spiritually

HOW TO SUPPORT GRIEVING CHILDREN

Children give us the gift of being in the present moment. It's also important for you and your family to focus on each day in front of you. Returning to a "new normal" routine is important to build order, stability, and confidence. Finding sources of pleasure, comfort, and connection with other friends and family members can also provide respite from the weight of sorrow. Giving kids choices around doing things that offer positive emotions can be empowering. Initially, grief can consume a large amount of energy as your family adjusts to your loss, offering less energy for other pursuits. Allowing for rest and quiet time can be important.

Grief presents kids with strong emotions they have never experienced before. They may regress and act younger than their age. They may be more "clingy" and need a lot of reassurance. Anger is a healthy and normal type of protest against change and loss, yet it needs to be expressed in a healthy way. Teaching young kids how to name emotions using a feeling chart is one idea for helping them control these feelings and become more self-aware. Learning how to calm your body is another important step for soothing the pain of grief.

IDEAS FOR SELF-SOOTHING IN GRIEF

- Shaking your body to release energy
- Singing, moaning, chanting
- Blowing bubbles slowly (to regulate breathing)
- Giving yourself a “butterfly hug” (Wrap your arms around your body so that each hand touches the opposite upper arm or shoulder. Then move your hands like the wings of a butterfly and tap your arms/shoulders in an alternating rhythm.)
<https://www.counselingconnectionsnm.com/blog/try-the-butterfly-hug-to-help-with-ptsd-symptoms>
- Screaming into or hitting a pillow
- Hitting a drum or punching bag
- Stomping on bubble wrap

Rules and healthy limit-setting can provide grieving kids with structure and security. Discipline for inappropriate behaviors should be imposed with a compassionate respect for the impact of grief on a child’s life. Talking about family expectations, new roles, and boundaries is also important. Children are naturally focused on themselves; this is developmentally appropriate. They may be more concerned about their well-being and meeting their own needs than those of others. That does not mean they didn’t care about the person who died. Children sometimes have the capacity to be compassionate with grieving adults, but they should not be expected to adopt a significant role in caring for adult grievers.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN

- Use specific words like “died” and avoid phrases like “he went to sleep” or “we lost grandma.”
- Use age-appropriate language to explain death to kids and what to expect after death.
- Give kids choices around participating in rituals or funerals.
- Allow children to say goodbye — through art, ritual, or if they desire, in person.
- Allow children to have “grief breaks;” play and laughter are okay during grief.
- Clarify the cause of death so children do not have magical ideas of responsibility or self-blame. Reassure a child that any thoughts or words they have had are not the cause of their loved one’s death (e.g., a child who is angry with their parent may fear that their angry thoughts caused the death).
- Don’t say anything to dismiss, deny, or minimize a child or teen’s grief.
- Be mindful of unfair and unrealistic expectations on kids, such as “You’re the man of the house now.” Children may take this kind of message as pressure to be a mini adult, when they need reassurance that they will be safe and cared for by the actual adults around them.

WHEN TO GET HELP FOR CHILDREN

Death and grief are normal parts of life. Yet they are also some of the hardest parts of life. Grief can be a pathway for children to learn coping skills for strong emotions and feelings of being different. If your child has a drop in school performance, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, a desire for self-harm, excessive tantrums and behavior problems, or difficulty managing their emotions or troubling

thoughts, it may be helpful to meet with trained grief counselors to support you and your children. Your child's school may also have counselors to support your child.

Sometimes it can be helpful for a grieving child to meet other kids who are going through a loss. Grief camps, support groups, school groups, books, and websites are available to help kids feel less alone; some resources are listed at the end of this booklet.

Most kids are resilient and can cope with their loss without professional help. Yet, studies show that children who have lost a parent have a higher chance of developing mental health, social, academic, and even medical challenges. Bereaved kids can struggle with self-esteem related to the loss of a parent. This can impair resilience and self-sufficiency which are important for later life. Recognizing mental health problems and intervening early can set the path for positive coping in the long term.

Sometimes kids and teens are not ready for grief support right away. They may be more open to counseling once they've established a new routine and confidence in basic survival. To be a successful kid who overcomes loss, children need a caring, supportive caregiver, but also compassionate communities, positive role models, healthy coping skills, peer support, and encouraging educators. If you are a bereaved solo parent, remember it truly does take a village to raise a bereaved child.

Having hope for the future is an important part of healing through grief. Children can provide that hope and help you honor your loved one's memory as time passes. Grief has the potential to strengthen family relationships. Be patient as you embark on this long journey of healing in your lives as a family. We wish you strength and enduring love in the days ahead.

**“Real love doesn’t die.
It’s the physical body that dies.**

**Genuine, authentic love has no expectations
whatsoever; it doesn’t even need
the physical presence of a person.**

**Even when he is dead and buried, that part
of you that loves the person will always live.”**

– Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

TEENS AND GRIEF

Adolescence is a time of great change and growth. The brain is expanding rapidly and more complex, abstract thoughts emerge. Teens understand that death is permanent and can happen to people close to them or to themselves. Teens naturally ponder the existential and spiritual meanings of life and death. So when a close loved one dies, teens react similarly to adults. Yet they also are still learning about regulating their emotions, being self-aware of their needs, and communicating their experience to others.

Adolescence is also a time of growing independence from parents and adult relatives. When a parent dies, the surviving parent may need closeness while a teen may want distance. Teens choose when to be private about their feelings and when to share them. They may choose to share their grief with coaches, teachers, counselors, or peers, rather than parents. Rather than talking, they may express grief through social media, athletics, journaling, art, or other outlets. Try to suspend judgment about how you want your teen to grieve. Invite your teen to come to you when they feel sad, need to talk,

or have questions. Never force them to talk about grief or go to counseling, but do intervene when immediate safety is a concern. Sometimes just sitting with silence is enough. Let them know you are there with them through this difficult grief experience.

Like any teen, grieving teens are in the process of increasing their responsibilities in the household, school, and communities. As a survival strategy, grieving families may need to divide household chores after the death of an adult. Eldest teens may drive their younger siblings to school or cook meals for the family. Change is hard and protest is understandable. Open communication about expectations, roles, stress, and energy levels can be helpful for families. While cultural and social norms influence every family, taking on adult responsibilities should not interfere with age-appropriate activities or school performance.

Like younger children, teens need to be able to take turns focusing on grief and then setting grief aside and focusing on their lives. Hanging out with peers and having positive social engagement are important during grief. Teens may not want to be different from their peers and should have control over whom they inform about the death in their family. Teens need to pursue sources of self-esteem and continue to develop their identities beyond their loss, and focus on their strengths, academic ambitions, and future goals. Sometimes this means teens are too busy to grieve. It can help to communicate about the benefits of focusing on the present and future, and the costs of complete avoidance of grief feelings in the present. Sometimes teens may experience denial of the reality of the death. This is an important protective mechanism which helps them pace their feelings, and is a natural way of letting in only what they can handle. Sometimes teens delve into their pursuits with a desire to honor and remember the person who died.

WHEN TO GET HELP FOR YOUR GRIEVING TEEN

- Risk-taking that can result in self-harm
- Experimenting with alcohol or drugs
- Intense anger, defiance, guilt, or regret
- Significant, pervasive social withdrawal
- Poor self-care habits (e.g. not eating, not motivated to shower or get out of bed)
- Suicidal thoughts (address any words of wanting to join their loved one who died)
- Death was traumatic and/or sudden and especially difficult to absorb

Every teen will be affected by loss differently. While loss can impose hardship, the death of a family member can also be an opportunity for growth and maturation in teens. They can learn what matters most and how precious loving relationships are. Coping with the strong emotions of grief can teach teens that feelings come and go, and that we can learn to live with them. Death helps us realize we have only one life to live and have the power to make choices to create a meaningful and positive life.

Being a parent or caregiver to children and teenagers is not easy in itself. Caring for your grieving children while coping with your own grief can mean layers of stress and frustration. Be patient and kind to yourself. Focus on priorities and trust the process. Despite enormous family change, celebrate what is going well for your children, teens, and family.

TAKING CARE OF THE CAREGIVER

Children (and adults) rely on adult attachment figures for safety and security. The absence of a loved one can lead to strong emotions, confusion, searching, and anxiety. Grieving children need secure, stable attachments with other adults in their lives after the loss of a parent or close family member. They need reassurance they will be cared for if something happens to a surviving parent or loved one. If you are a new solo parent, taking care of yourself and your grief will be especially important for your children's adjustment to this loss and their overall well-being. As a parent, it's okay to cry in front of your kids, and it's also okay to protect your children from the intensity of your pain. Sometimes, if a child sees their parent crying, they don't want to burden them and feel the need to hide their own tears. Other times, protecting your child from your emotional pain can give the message that it's not okay to cry or share grief. Talking about grief and sharing feelings can reduce its intensity.

**“Only people who are capable of loving strongly
can also suffer a great sorrow, but this same
necessity of loving serves to counteract
their grief and heals them.”**

—Leo Tolstoy

REMEMBERING THE PERSON WHO DIED

Death ends a life, not a relationship. Like adults, grieving children benefit from having the sense of an ongoing relationship with the person who died. This is a symbolic, emotional, or spiritual bond. Imaginary conversation is part of this bond. Sometimes this helps children feel protected or guided in their lives. Being able to record

memories, remember happy memories, tell stories about the person who died, or find common traits, interests, and values can comfort children when they are missing a loved one.

WHEN IS GRIEF OVER?

Grief changes and moves as time passes. According to research, children can take as long as two years to be able to understand and express the impact of the loss of their loved one in their lives.* Sometimes, we expect grief to end or go away. Usually, grief remains in your family's life, but in a less dominant way over time. Your life activities expand around the grief. However, birthdays, holidays, and other significant dates can be sensitive times when grief can intensify. New milestones as a child grows up (starting a new school, having a significant performance or sporting event, graduations, and many other significant moments) can temporarily reignite grief over the years. Sharing memories and telling stories, going to the cemetery, or doing something the person who died loved can be proactive ways to take care of the waves of grief that come and go over time. Moving forward is healthy and inevitable, and does not mean forgetting the person who died.

It is said that love never dies. Enduring love does not always mean enduring grief. We naturally adjust from remembering our loved one with pain to remembering them with love. Losing a parent or close family member is a significant event in a child's life. Yet it need not define the child's identity. Many kids do not want to be treated differently because of their loss or known as the child whose parent died. While love, memory and loss will be part of a grieving child's story, how a child learns to live fully with their loss can foster self-awareness, growth, meaning, and maturity.

* 1996 Harvard Child Bereavement Study

RESOURCES

Tips for grieving teens

https://www.dougy.org/assets/uploads/Tips-for-Teens-Who-are-Grieving_2023-03-17-201232.pdf

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call 988 or 1(800) 273-TALK (8255)

National Alliance for Children's Grief nacg.org

The Dougy Center www.dougy.org/grief-support-resources

Sesame Street Helping Kids Grieve

sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief

Coalition to Support Grieving Students <https://grievingstudents.org>

Teen Grief Resources

www.hov.org/our-care/grief-support/grief-resources/teen-grief-resources

Statistics on childhood grief

www.newyorklife.com/assets/foundation/docs/pdfs/childhood-grief.pdf

Books and other resources on grief

centering.org

BAY AREA RESOURCES

Josie's Place, San Francisco: Child and teen grief support groups

josiesplace.org

Kara, Palo Alto: Child and teen grief support groups with concurrent parent groups kara-grief.org

The Compassionate Friends, Mid-Peninsula chapter: Support for parents who have lost a child, and also for siblings and grandparents

www.compassionatefriends.org/chapter/tcf-mid-peninsula-chapter

By the Bay Health: Monthly grief support group for bereaved parents (San Francisco, San Mateo, Marin, and Sonoma Counties)

bythebayhealth.org/support-group-calendar

**"What we have once enjoyed
we can never lose.
All that we love deeply becomes a part of us."**

—Helen Keller



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