



Bereavement Support

Suggestions and Guidelines for
Children and Youth



DukeHealth

Bereavement Support

How does your family cope and communicate? Each child and family is unique with different ways of coping. Each family's needs are different. Use this as a guide to determine what is best for your child and your family.

Many factors will determine how a child or young person experiences loss when someone they love has died.

Some of these include:

- Age
- Gender
- Their developmental stage
- Personality and how they cope with stressful situations
- Ways they experience and express emotions
- Their relationship with the person who has died
- Previous experiences with death
- Family circumstances and dynamics
- Amount of support provided by loved ones and caregivers

Things to consider

How has this death affected you personally?

Take time to care for yourself. Be aware that your emotions might affect your ability to meet the needs of others. It is helpful to be truthful about your own emotions and it is appropriate for children to see you cry. Children may become fearful if you are not in control of your emotions.

How do your family's religious and spiritual beliefs provide comfort?

What role does spirituality and religion play during a time of death?

What specific events or rituals are associated with the death of a loved one.

Prepare children for what they might see, hear, or experience during these times of remembrance. Carefully consider what is in your child's best interest based on their age and other individual factors. When it is possible, give the child choices.

Consider how this death may cause changes to family dynamics and daily routines.

Make plans for how to talk about and prepare for the changes ahead.

Beginning a Conversation

Some general suggestions for beginning a conversation with children about the loss of a loved one include:

Sharing information quickly, directly, and as honestly as possible

It is helpful for children to hear information about death from a primary caregiver as this caregiver will be a continual source of support. Avoid postponing this conversation as they may hear things from various sources through outside conversations. This may cause confusion or inaccurate worries or concerns about what is actually happening. Use real, straight forward language as much as possible when planning a developmentally appropriate explanation. Phrases such as passed away or asleep can be confusing. Always be honest.

Timing is important

Preparing children for different stages of the death process is helpful if the opportunity presents itself. Acknowledging the possibility of death and that death may be soon can give a child the time to process information and increase their ability to cope.

Maintain household routines as much as possible.

Children and youth feel comfort within the consistency of familiar routines and boundaries. Maintaining rituals that are part of everyday life is reassuring. Repetition helps young children with feelings of predictability and comfort.

Maintain open communication

Always offer opportunities to talk and listen with your child. Encourage them to ask questions. Keep in mind that some questions you might not be able to answer. “I don’t know” is an appropriate answer.

Communication with your child’s school and other important people or caregivers in their life is also helpful to provide consistency for the child. Be direct about what types of support and care your child may or may not need in any setting outside the home. Share with those caring for your child how you have spoken to them about the death including words and phrases that the child is familiar with based on your discussions in the home.

Validate your child's feelings

Verbally acknowledge your own feelings of sadness, acknowledging your child's emotions, and validating these feelings with supportive interactions. Validating and accepting your child's emotions helps you to begin the conversation about ways to cope or feel better. "It's OK to feel sad...I feel sad too."

Encourage further dialogue and conversations

Children and teenagers who have experienced death will need ongoing attention, reassurance, and support. As children begin to develop as individuals they may need different types of support during different stages of growth.

Preserve Memories

It is helpful to assist children or work together to create ways to remember loved ones through stories, crafts, photographs, or celebrations. Creating something tangible that the child can keep, hold, and look at is helpful.

*"If a child is old enough to love...
they are old enough to grieve."*

Linda Goldman

Ways to Help a Grieving Child

Help the child feel safe again

- Maintain routines...increase predictability for the child
- Take care of yourself and stay calm in their presence
- Manage unnecessary changes in the child's life
- Be present...actively listen and encourage
- Allow opportunities for the child to make decisions

Help the child understand death

- Provide honest information. Use concrete terms
- Offer repetition of explanations answer questions as many times as they are asked
- Let the child talk about or play through the death
- Remind the child that the death of a loved one is not their fault

Help the child actively mourn

- Talk about the child's feelings. Help your child label their emotions
- Provide safe opportunities to release anger or sadness...drawing, writing, play and safe opportunities for physical release
- Let your child see you mourn and be honest about your sadness. Reassure them that it is normal to feel sad

Help the child stay connected to the deceased

- Discuss religious or spiritual beliefs that might bring comfort
- Create rituals for remembrance particularly around holidays
- Share stories and memories
- Display photos and create scrapbooks

Let the child be themselves

- Laugh and play
- Participate in activities of interest
- Spend time together...give hugs and show affection

Bereavement Support for Babies and Toddlers (Birth-3 years old)

Grieving babies and toddlers...

- Don't have an understanding of death
- Don't have the language necessary to express how they are feeling
- May sense loss and miss their loved one.
- Confuse a permanent loss with a short absence
- Experience feelings of separations that can affect healthy feelings of security and attachment
- Will sense and respond to the anxiety and distress of adults or caregivers

Typical behaviors of grieving babies and toddlers might include...

- Looking for the person who has died
- Increased irritability, fussiness, and more frequent crying
- An increased desire to be held
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Regression to previous states of development

How to help grieving babies and toddlers

- Acknowledge and verbalize feelings for your child. Labeling your child's emotions encourages their ability to recognize them in themselves and later communicate them with others
- Validate their feelings
- Maintain normal routines and schedules
- Provide consistent and loving care in a familiar setting
- Give simple and honest explanations
- Speak gently and maintain a calm demeanor
- Provide familiar comfort items such as favorite blankets and toys
- Hold and cuddle them more

Engaging with your infant or toddler

Infants and toddlers feel safe through repetition and through consistently meeting their basic needs. Maintain a consistent and predictable schedule. With infants, continue to engage your child with eye contact and interaction especially during feeding and sleeping routines. Babies especially love simplified and repetitive speech that often contains rhythm and a pleasing tone. Toddlers will enjoy songs or finger plays that encourage you to physically touch or tickle your infant bringing connection, joy and a sense of safety in your presence. Maintaining consistency and offering opportunities for eye contact and gentle interaction will build your child's sense of secure attachment even in the midst of grief.

Bereavement Support for Preschoolers (Ages 3-5)

Grieving preschoolers...

- Usually think death is temporary or reversible
- Can't understand the permanence of death
- Understand the idea of separation and long for their loved one.
- Possibly experiencing feelings of abandonment
- Feel overwhelmed by strong emotions
- Have difficulty verbally expressing their emotions
- Experience feelings of separations that can affect healthy feelings of security and attachment
- Will sense and respond to the anxiety and distress of adults or caregivers
- Delayed responses are typical in early childhood. Questions may arise for months and be quite repetitive as they are adjusting to changes related to the death

Typical behaviors of grieving preschool aged children might include...

- Looking for the person who has died
- May ask when the loved deceased loved one will “come home” or return
- Expressing fears about being alone or being abandoned
- Having trouble with short separations from primary caregiver such as being left at preschool or child care
- Expressing an increased desire to be held and comforted
- Increased irritability and possible tantrums. Young children express themselves and their emotions through behaviors
- Withdrawing or showing a lack of response
- Changes in eating, sleeping, and toileting routines
- Regression to previous behaviors or stages of development
- May fantasize that their behaviors or actions may have led to the death of the loved one

How to help grieving preschoolers

- Acknowledge and verbalize feelings for your child. Labeling emotions encourages emotional competence and communication. Teach and use words that describe their feelings so that they understand what their feelings are
- Validate their feelings...this means to accept their feelings. “It’s OK to feel sad.”
- Maintain normal routines and schedules

- Reassure your child that they are safe
- Reassure your child they are not responsible for the death of a loved one
- Avoid separations from primary caregivers when possible
- Provide consistent and loving care in a familiar setting
- Give simple and honest explanations. Explain death as a part of life making connections with familiar concepts such as how death is observed in nature
- Speak gently and maintain a calm demeanor
- Provide familiar comfort items such as favorite blankets and toys
- Encourage play. Play is enjoyable and comforting. Play is also the language of young children. The act of playing can give children a means to express themselves at a safe distance but also offers opportunity to understand a child's thoughts
- Hold and cuddle them more. Hold their hands, offer verbal reassurance and encourage them. Be patient
- Preschoolers learn through repetition. They may ask the same questions often and need the consistency of repeated experiences

Dialogue Suggestions

"I wonder if you are feeling sad or have questions about how _____ died."

"You might feel sad because you miss him or her and wish they were here."

"You will always love _____ even though he/she isn't here with us now."

"When someone dies it means their body has stopped working. _____ was (sick, in an accident, etc) . It was not your fault that they died."

"Would you like to talk about some of your questions or worries?"

"I feel sad and sometimes I have worries too."

"We can remember _____ when we look at his/her pictures and we can always tell stories about _____."

"We can also give each other extra hugs. That way we can care for each other."

Things to talk about...ways to remember

- I'm sad about _____.
- When I was with (insert name), I liked to _____.
- The hardest part right now is _____.
- I'll miss _____.
- I smile when _____.
- I most want to remember _____.
- My favorite thing about them is _____.

Bereavement Support for School Aged Children (Ages 6-9)

Children grieving in middle childhood...

- Are still learning about death. Some things are more clear but may still have confusion about the finality of death
- School aged children may have concerns that the person who died may still feel things such as hunger, cold, or loneliness
- See death as something that happens to old people and may have concerns, anger or fear when this rule doesn't apply to their situation
- Will focus on how this death will impact them, their daily routines and they may begin to have concerns for their own safety
- Might ask questions about where the person is now and have the need for more concrete answers about what happened to their loved one and their body

Typical behaviors of school-aged children might include

- Becoming easily distracted or seeming to lack focus or be more forgetful
- Possible withdraw from loved ones or peers
- Might show lack of response
- Being more anxious and having increased fear
- Being more irritable or seeming defiant
- Blaming themselves for the death
- Feeling embarrassed or “different” from others
- Physical complaints such as stomachaches or headaches as it is difficult to describe the emotional pains associated with grief
- Regression or changes in eating, sleeping or toileting habits
- Expressions of insecurity about attachments and wanting to be near to primary caregivers more often
- Needing more hugs and physical reassurance of your presence

How to help grieving school-aged children

- Acknowledge and verbalize feelings for your child. Labeling emotions encourages emotional competence and communication. Teach and use words that describe their feelings
- Validate their feelings and acknowledge your own feeling of sadness or frustration
- Maintain normal routines and schedules. Activities of interest that keep children engaged are important to normalizing the experience and maintaining their growing need for independence supporting a positive sense of self
- Frequently reassure your child that they are safe
- Reassure them they are not responsible for the death of a loved one
- Avoid separations from primary caregivers when possible
- Provide consistent and loving care in a familiar setting

- Give simple and honest explanations. Explain death as a part of life making connections with familiar concepts such as how death is observed in nature
- Speak gently and maintain a calm demeanor
- Provide familiar comfort items such as favorite blankets and toys
- Encourage play. Play is enjoyable and comforting. Play is also the language of children. The act of playing can give children a means to express themselves at a safe distance
- Comfort them with hugs and close physical proximity. Spend time with them. Offer verbal reassurances and encourage them
- Provide comfort items such as blankets or cuddly toys as well as comfort items that once belonged to their loved ones that would be seen as reassuring to the child
- Allow opportunities for questions and provide honest answers. Remind them you are always available to talk or listen
- Speak gently and remain calm in their presence
- Be patient

Dialogue Suggestions

"It is hard to talk about death. Everyone responds different."

"You might have questions about death that are hard to ask."

"I wonder if you have questions about how _____ died? I hope you know it is not your fault."

"_____ has been sick for a while. Their body is no longer able to do the things it needs to do to have life. Her/his heart is not beating like yours is...He/she does not breath now"

"I am here to help you if I can."

"You might be feeling many different emotions. You might be sad or angry or confused or even have a lot of feelings at the same time."

"Would you like to draw (or write or paint) about your feelings? Do you have some ideas of things we could do to feel better. Some of these feelings may come back at different times and sometimes your feelings might feel very big. I am here to help you with those feelings. Sometimes I feel very sad too."

Things to talk about...ways to remember

- I'm sad about _____.
- When I was with (insert name), I liked to _____.
- The hardest part right now is _____.
- I'll miss _____.
- I smile when _____.
- I most want to remember _____.
- My favorite thing about them is _____.

Bereavement Support for Preteens (Ages 10-12)

Grieving preteens...

- Are beginning to understand the finality of death
- Become more fearful of death because they can understand their own mortality
- May ask more specific questions about death, the body, or rituals surrounding death
- Are more aware of how adults around them are reacting to the death

Typical behaviors of grieving preteens might include

- Beginning to worry more about the safety of family and friends
- Trying to please adults and not cause them worry, preventing the preteen from grieving themselves
- Being more irritable or seeming defiant
- Feeling embarrassed or “different” from others

How to help grieving preteens...

- Provide consistent and loving care in a familiar setting
- Validate their feelings and acknowledge your own feeling of sadness, anger, or frustration
- Maintain normal routines and schedules. Activities of interest that keep children engaged are important to normalizing the experience and maintaining their growing need for independence supporting a positive sense of self
- Frequently reassure them that they are safe
- Reassure them they are not responsible for the death of a loved one
- Prepare your preteen for events or rituals that will take place in memory of their loved ones. Describe what they may see, hear, and experience at funerals or other services of remembrance
- Invite your preteen to participate in activities or endeavors to remember their loved one. Encourage ways to create physical memories and reminders
- Comfort your preteen with hugs, continuing to encourage them. Offer to spend time with them doing activities they enjoy

Dialogue Suggestions

"It is hard to talk about death. Everyone responds different."

"I wonder if you have questions about how _____ died? I hope you know it is not your fault."

"_____ has been sick for a while. Their body is no longer able to do the things it needs to do to have life."

"You might feel sad because you miss him or her and wish they were here."

"You will always love _____ even though he/she isn't here with us now."

"When someone dies it means their body has stopped working. _____ was (sick, in an accident, etc) . It was not your fault that they died."

"You might have questions about death that are hard to ask. I am here to help you if I can."

"You might be feeling many different emotions. You might be sad or angry or confused or even have a lot of feelings at the same time."

"Would you like to draw (or write or paint) about your feelings? Would it help to throw something really hard to go out and run?"

"Do you have some ideas of things we could do to feel better?"

"Some of these feelings may come back at different times and sometimes your feelings might feel very big."

"I am here to help you with those feelings. Sometimes I feel very sad too."

Things to talk about...ways to remember

- I'm sad about _____.
- When I was with (insert name), I liked to _____.
- The hardest part right now is _____.
- I'll miss _____.
- I smile when _____.
- I most want to remember _____.
- My favorite thing about them is _____.

Bereavement Support for Teenagers

Grieving teenagers...

- Are more likely to accept death as a part of life but most likely have fewer experiences with death
- Understand that death is final
- May desire to spend time with friends and seek the support of their peers more than they seek out support from family
- May want to feel in control of their managing their outward emotional response but may be hurting on the inside
- Might react to death through engaging in risk taking behaviors
- May have more questions about death, dying, and mortality

Typical behaviors of grieving teenagers include...

- Loss of concentration or being easily distracted or forgetful, sometimes having difficulty at school
- Becoming overwhelmed with emotion
- Being irritable or defiant
- Seeming indifferent or acting as though they don't care, masking their feelings
- Strained relationships with others or an increased desire to take on additional responsibilities and please loved ones or family members
- A sense of loneliness or isolation as there could be feelings of embarrassment or difference from their peers. Teens might conceal their loss
- Changes in how they identify themselves, lower self esteem
- Possibly moving from sadness to depression

How to help grieving teens...

- As much as possible, maintain daily routines and schedules. Continue activities of interest that help you teen feel a sense of identity and purpose
- Avoid forcing them to engage in conversation about death or grief as they may show reluctance in sharing their grief with adults
- Share your sadness, frustration, or worry first to express a sense of understanding and validation. Remind your teen that extreme emotion is normal including feelings of guilt or regret
- Talk openly and encourage your teen that no topic is "off limits" Be honest.
- Be an active listener avoiding critical comments or thoughts that may seem judgmental
- Be observant of behaviors that seem harmful or signs of depression. Seek professional help as needed
- Maintain age appropriate expectations for your teen. Although physically mature, allow them to express their emotion in developmentally appropriate ways
- Encourage other outlets for self-expression such as journaling, art, music, and physical activities

- Teens enjoy the camaraderie of peers. Reaching out to friends in your child's age group who also have had death experiences might be helpful. If available support groups can be useful as well
- Frequently offer reassurance and expressions of safety. Acknowledge adults that are trusting that can be used for further comfort or support
- Prepare your teen for events or rituals that will take place in memory of their loved ones. Describe what they may see, hear, and experience at funerals or services of remembrance
- Invite your teen to participate in memorial tributes to the loved ones and suggest ways to create physical memories and reminders
- Comfort your teen with hugs, continuing to encourage them. Offer to spend time with them doing activities they enjoy

Dialogue Suggestions

"I care about you and I know this is a tough time."

"I wonder if you have questions about how _____ died? I hope you know it is not your fault."

"_____ has been sick for a while. Their body is no longer able to do the things it needs to do to have life."

"You might feel sad because you miss him or her and wish they were here."

"You will always love _____ even though he/she isn't here with us now."

"When someone dies it means their body has stopped working. _____ was (sick, in an accident, etc) . It was not your fault that they died."

"I'm here for you if you would like to talk or if you just want someone to be around."

"Whenever you feel ready, we can talk about things that might help you get through this tough time."

"I wonder if you have ideas about things you might want to do to remember _____ or to feel better"

Things to talk about...ways to remember

- I'm sad about _____.
- When I was with (insert name), I liked to _____.
- The hardest part right now is _____.
- I'll miss _____.
- I smile when _____.
- I most want to remember _____.
- My favorite thing about them is _____.

