



CHILDREN & GRIEF

Helping children make sense of their changing world

When Someone Special is Dying

It is natural to want to protect children from the pain of this experience. However, allowing children to participate in the family experience can be a positive and invaluable life opportunity.

Children are well aware that “something is up” when the adults in their lives shift focus from everyday life to a stressful caregiving situation. **Children learn how to respond and cope with this experience by watching how the adults in their lives respond.**

Protecting children from the experience does not provide the comfort adults want for children. In fact, **failing to discuss these experiences can generate fears, anxieties, and confusion.** It can lead a child to draw their own, often scary, conclusions about what is happening to a loved one.

As the Illness Progresses

As the patient's illness progresses, there may be changes in the patient's behavior that may worry children. If Grandpa is sleeping all the time, is shouting, or is very thin, children will notice. A simple explanation tells the child that it's okay to talk about the things that are happening.

Children need to know in clear and simple terms what is happening. It is just as important to listen to their thoughts and reactions as it is to give them explanations.



Ways to Include Children in Caregiving

The family is the most important part of younger children's lives. **Children need to feel included, even at a sad time.** Take the time to include children in caring for a dying loved one if the child is willing to but do not force it. It can help your child feel as though they are part of what is happening by:

- Bringing the loved one a cup of water or a magazine
- Singing a song or drawing a picture
- Playing in the same room
- Drawing a picture for the loved one

An older child may wish to:

- Help prepare meals
- Help run errands

Remember to help children understand that when someone is dying, they may be grouchy or not feel like talking. Tell children this is okay and has nothing to do with them.



Coping Techniques

Encourage children to cope with their grief, including anticipatory grief, by helping them discover what healthy coping techniques work best for them.

- Talking about scary feelings and asking questions.
- Using creative expression such as writing or drawing about how they feel.
- Playing with friends or watching funny movies.
- Running, biking, taking a walk outside, or any activity that involves getting up and moving.

Remember, offering simple choices to a child who feels they have little or no control can be quite helpful.

Answering Difficult Questions

A child's developmental stage, temperament, and relationship with the person they are missing are factors in how an upcoming or recent loss is felt and expressed. It is a very individual process and differs from child to child, or situation to situation. There is no "best" way to grieve, just as there is not a timeline.

While trusted adults cannot take away a child's difficult thoughts and feelings, you can make sure that the children know that you are listening and are available to them to share their feelings, worries, and questions.

- **Be patient** with the child and with yourself. Children may ask the same questions repeatedly. It is best to answer honestly, giving age-appropriate information. The child's age will determine how much they understand. As they grow up, they will understand more and will ask more questions about how their loved one died.
- **Listen.** The best thing a trusted adult can do is listen when the child speaks. Sometimes, the child may not have the words to explain how they are feeling. **Create a safe space** and time for them to explore their emotions. You can offer to draw, offer to listen to whatever they want to say, and allow them to explain their thoughts without interjecting too often. If you aren't sure what the child is asking, ask for clarification.
- It's OK that you may not have all the answers or may not be ready to answer a question. **Be honest.** If you don't know the answer, say *"I don't know, what do you think?"* as this gives the child the ability to share his thoughts and feelings. It's better to say you don't know than to guess or make something up. If you tell the child that you will find out the information, try to do so.

Helping a Child Through Their Grief

It's important to allow children to share in the grieving process. Encourage them to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Take time to listen and share your grief with them too. It lets them know it is normal to cry and feel sad after a death. Share fond memories and encourage them to share their own memories. **Every person's reaction to death is unique; the signs of grief in children may be observed in many ways, including:**

- Acting out
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Changes in academic grades
- Sleep disturbances
- Headaches, stomachaches, or skin rashes
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Regressing behaviors, such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, or clinging.

Understand that these are temporary and support the child through them rather than punish them. Reach out for support whenever needed.



Preparing Children to Attend Funerals



Deciding whether a child should attend calling hours or a funeral can be challenging. It's important to have an open conversation with the child, taking into account their relationship with the deceased and their comfort with sitting quietly during the service. Attendance should never be forced—respect their wishes and ensure they don't feel isolated from the grieving process. Help reassure children by:

- Clearly describing what will happen during the services. Avoid vague language that could cause confusion.
- Explaining what they might see and hear, including people expressing sadness or crying.

Involving children in the service can make the experience more meaningful. They might choose to share a poem or a personal memory. They may also help create a picture board or memory book to honor the loved one. These small roles can provide comfort and a sense of connection as they say goodbye.