

Grief's Journey for Children and Teens



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OUR MISSION

To provide counseling, support and care to anyone with a serious illness, so they may live life to the fullest.

OUR VISION

We are deeply committed to giving people the clear information and loving support they need to make informed choices about their care.

YOUR CHILD'S GRIEF JOURNEY

Grief is a normal reaction to the death of a loved one and is experienced by adults and children alike. Though it is natural to want to protect children from loss, there is no way to hide it from them. Nor should you try. Children notice others' responses to loss even if they don't understand what they see. Death is a part of life, and children should be included in grief just as they are in other important life events, such as the birth of a sibling or marriage of a family member.

Children are generally resilient. With support and understanding, they are able to process loss and grieve in ways that support healthy development. Supporting children and teens in their grief journey doesn't have to be complicated or scary, even if you are grieving alongside them. Simply providing comfort and reassurance can help a child feel more grounded when the world is spinning due to a loss.

UNDERSTANDING A CHILD'S GRIEF REACTIONS

Just like adults, children want and need their grief acknowledged. They want assurance that their feelings are "normal" and that they will be "OK." It is important for anyone grieving to find ways to express their grief in safe and healthy ways. Children likely will need more guidance in doing so.

A child's understanding of their loss changes over time, and they may continue to feel the impact of the loss throughout life, especially as new milestones arise. As a child grows older, their understanding of the loss helps shape who they are and how they make sense of the world.

"Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve."

— Alan Wolfelt, grief expert and author

GRIEF REACTIONS BY AGE

Grief can manifest in physical, emotional, behavioral, social and spiritual ways. The way a child responds to grief differs by developmental age. (Developmental age may differ from chronological age.)

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

- Cranky, clingy, excessive crying
- Sleep disturbances
- Separation anxiety
- Sensitivity to emotions of adults around them

AGES 3 – 6

- Magical thinking (believing that death is temporary or feeling responsible for death)
- Feelings acted out in play
- Physical complaints
- Acting out

AGES 6 – 9

- Understanding that death is final
- Want details of death
- Deny death happened
- Fear that other loved ones may die
- Difficulty concentrating
- Behavior shifts (neediness, aggression, good behavior)

AGES 9 – 12

- Understanding universality of death
- Feelings of anger, guilt, confusion, fear
- Acting out with aggression or violence
- May try to hide/deny feelings
- May express indifference (“I don’t care”)

TEENAGERS

- Preoccupation with death
- Deny they need help
- Act as if they don't want to talk about it
- Risky behaviors may develop
- Compensate by becoming a caretaker
- Development of chronic depression, low self-esteem, sleep difficulties, restlessness
- May express exaggerated outpouring of emotions

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Infants and toddlers primarily experience grief in terms of how their caregivers are interacting with them. They respond to changes in an adult's emotional availability to them. If their primary caregiver was the one who died, the child will need stability, nurturance and security. Consider how routines can be kept the same prior to the loss. Who is available to help with meals? Being held, rocked and soothed are important to maintaining a sense of security.

AGES 3 TO 6

Children from about the ages 3 to 6 do not fully understand the concept of death. They may ask questions such as "Where is Daddy?" or "When can I go see Grandma?" even though they have been told several times that their loved one has died. When faced with difficult questions relating to death, keep words and explanations simple, speaking to them on their level.

Magical thinking at this age could lead to the child questioning if they somehow caused the death. Conversely they may believe they can "bring them back" (e.g., saying, "I promise I will be good.") Remember, because of magical thinking that accompanies this age, children who are told their loved one is sleeping may fear

bedtime or think that being sick always leads to dying. Be honest with children, explaining that “dead” means that a person’s body has stopped working and that there is a distinction between a common cold and a more serious illness.

Grief may be manifested physically, as when children exhibit regressive behavior (i.e., bed wetting, thumb sucking or not wanting to sleep alone) or report physical ailments such as stomach aches, headaches or feeling scared. Patience and understanding are crucial, not punishment and consequences. Children at this developmental stage may become clingy or emotional, and you may notice some separation anxiety when loved ones leave. Many of these behaviors resolve in their own time, similar to other grief reactions.

Remember, routines and physical interaction are ways to create safety and security. This may be a challenge for those who have lost a spouse and are now single parents for the first time, but being as consistent as possible and setting boundaries can help with the adjustment. Consider accepting, or asking for, support from others.

AGES 6 AND OLDER

Once children begin school (6 years and older), they understand the finality of death and recognize it can happen to anyone. They may ask questions because they want to know details about the death. They may experience nightmares or worry that they, or other loved ones, may die too. In addition, children may become preoccupied with death and have difficulty concentrating in school. Grades may drop and children may act out in class. They may develop physical ailments and visit the nurse more often. Asking them to explore how they feel about the loss may help them find a better strategy to process their grief and become comfortable with their emotions.

Similar to younger children, it is important to communicate openly and honestly. Encourage them to ask questions and discuss how they are feeling. As an adult, you are modeling healthy grief for your child. It is OK for you to talk about the deceased, using his or her name in conversation and sharing your own feelings as appropriate. By expressing your grief, you are demonstrating that it is OK for them to do so as well.

TEENS

Teenagers must adjust to the loss in the midst of navigating many other changes, physically and socially. Teens are developing their own identity and crave independence. Though they may isolate and appear indifferent, teens need help and guidance from adults. Some teens are more emotional or dramatic, or have a preoccupation with death. Acting out is common behavior among teens. Some of this behavior may result from attempts to cope with their feelings. Be sure to allow for a teen's privacy, but be in tune to how they find comfort.

Teenagers want to be seen as “normal” to their peers and may avoid talking about death or their feelings. Others who have previously found support from peers may continue to seek it there. While it is OK for a teen to spend more time with friends, make sure you let them know you are there for them and that other resources are available if they experience difficulty coping.

For all school-aged children, school should be made aware of the changes in the child's life. Maintaining structure, respecting their privacy, and letting them know you are there for them if and when they need you can be invaluable through the tough times.

Finding a counselor who specializes in grief, or a grief support group for kids, may also be helpful.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP THE CHILD GRIEVER

- **Consider your loss history** – How you experience loss and manage your grief can be important factors in how you support a child.
- **Be open and non-judgmental** – Encourage a child to express feelings and thoughts in their own way.
- **Listen with interest** – Pay attention to the underlying messages, ask questions to get more information and seek clarification in what the child is saying.
- **Honest discussions** – Use language they can understand.
- **Observe and encourage child’s play** – Play is a child’s tool for making sense of their world.
- **Keep to routines** – Routines help create a sense of safety and security.
- **Be patient** – Adults and children may not be in the same grief “place” at the same time.

SUGGESTED READING FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN AND TEENS

PRESCHOOL/ELEMENTARY

Brown, Laurie and Marc. **When Dinosaurs Die**. 1988. *In simple language, explains feelings people may have regarding the death of someone they love and discusses ways to honor the memory of someone who dies.*

Burleigh, Robert. **Goodbye Sheepie**. 2010. *A dad helps his son deal with the death of his pet dog.*

Hart, Debra Joy. **Grandma D's Bubbles, A Lesson in Life and Loss**. 2015. *Grandma D shares with grieving Sophia how "bubbles are like the people and animals we love."*

Kartz, Patrice. **The Invisible String**. 2000. *A simple story that reminds children and adults they are never alone. "People who love each other are always connected by a very special String made of love."*

Portnoy, Mindy Avra. **Where Do People Go When They Die?** 2004. *A reference to Heaven and God in dealing with questions about what happens after someone dies.*

Thomas, Pat. **I Miss You, A First Look at Death**. 2000. *Simple language to explain what happens when someone dies and the feelings people may have; also reviews various customs of dealing with the dead.*

Varley, Susan. **Badger's Parting Gifts**. 1984. *Badger's friends are sad when he dies, but they treasure the legacies he left them.*

TEENAGERS

Gootman, Marilyn. **When a Friend Dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing**. 2005. *Speaks to teens in a simple, straightforward way, answering common questions teens may have.*

Grollman, Earl. **Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers**. 1993. *Addresses what to expect when someone a teen cares about dies.*

Krementz, Jill. **How It Feels When a Parent Dies**. 1988. *18 vignettes written by kids ages 7 to 17, sharing feelings about the death of a parent*

Samuel-Traisman, Enid. **Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins: A Journal for Teens Experiencing a Loss**. 1992. *A guided journal that will help teens know their feelings are normal.*

Wheeler, Jenny Lee. **Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve**. 2010. *16-year-old Jenny Wheeler shares her personal experience of loss following the death of her father to cancer.*

Wolfelt, Alan D. **Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas**. 2001. *Simple tips for understanding and expressing your grief.*

SUGGESTED READING FOR CAREGIVERS

Fitzgerald, Helen. **The Grieving Teen**. 2000. *Addresses the special needs of adolescents struggling with loss and gives them tools they need to work through grief.*

Hanson, Warren. **The Next Place**. 1997. *An inspirational journey of light and hope. Lovely art accompanies this poetic story.*

Kroen, William C. **Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One**. *A Guide for Grownups*. 1996. *Offers advice to any adult helping a child deal with a death; discusses issues from infancy to 18 years.*

Smith, Harold Ivan. **When a Child You Love is Grieving, 2nd edition**. 2012. *Practical steps you can take to ensure that a grieving child receives necessary, healthy outlets after the loss of a loved one.*

Wolfelt, Alan D. **Finding the Words. How to Talk with Children and Teens About Death, Suicide, Funerals, Homicide, Cremation, and Other End-of-life Matters**. 2013. *A quick reference guide on how to talk with children about death and other end-of-life matters.*

Our grief counselors, who are master's prepared and licensed, are available to support you and your loved ones. Our counselors and specially trained volunteers also facilitate a variety of grief support groups, workshops and events for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

For more information, call 1.888.823.8880 or email gilchrist_grief@gilchristcares.org.

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