

Grief and the Young Child

Help for the Three to Five Year Old



**I have the right to my own unique feelings about death
I may feel mad, sad, or lonely. I may feel scared or relieved.
I may feel numb or sometimes not anything at all.
No one will feel exactly like I do.**

WinterSpring

We're not afraid to be with loss

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HELPING A CHILD COPE WITH DEATH

1. Set time aside to talk to your child. Explain without much detail and in a simple manner what has occurred. Encourage questions.
2. When answering questions, it's okay to say, "I don't know, but let's try to find out." Call us at WinterSpring for suggestions.
3. Use the correct language. Say, "dead" not "sleeping," "gone to Heaven," "went to God," or other confusing messages.
4. Keep in mind that grieving is a natural process, and that with your support, your child has the natural ability to cope.
5. Children are more likely than adults to cycle through emotions quickly, moving from sadness to carefree play within minutes. This is normal and doesn't indicate a lack of acknowledgement of the loss.
6. Know that a child's choice not to talk about grief feelings does not indicate the lack of grief. Children often express feelings non-verbally, or may withdraw into silence about grief in a desire to "protect" parents.
7. Ask the child about his feelings. Listen. Don't judge. Talk about each of them --sad, angry, guilty, scared, etc.
8. Explain your feelings too, especially when you're crying. Give yourself permission to cry. It's appropriate behavior to model for our children and encourages them not to be ashamed.
9. Use the loved one's name. Don't be afraid to "go there."
10. Read a book together. Many wonderful children's books on grief are available for different age levels. Take time to discuss the book and how it pertains to your loss. Comfort and reassure your child with loving support.
11. Allow your child to memorialize her own way with art, writing, or a ceremony. Let her choose what will comfort her. Acknowledge her efforts.
12. Talk about memories, both good and bad.
13. Watch out for bad dreams. Are they occurring often? Talk about dreams and listen to your child recount them.
14. Behavioral changes may occur at home and at day care or preschool. Returning to earlier behaviors, fearfulness, and acting-out may occur. If you feel your child needs help, contact WinterSpring for suggestions.



Frequently Asked Questions

Should I talk about the traumatic event?

Don't be afraid to talk about the traumatic event. Children do not benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds.' If a child senses that adults around her are upset about the event, she may not bring it up even if she wants to. In traumatic death, there are two central challenges for the child: processing the actual traumatic event (e.g., the shooting, the accident, the fire), and coping with loss of the loved one. In the immediate post-traumatic period, the child's thoughts will be dominated by the terrorizing event. The loss of the loved one looms as a shadow in these first weeks. Over time, however, the child's thoughts and feelings will be dominated by loss. The primary emotion of the first phase is fear; the primary emotion of the second is sadness.

In the long run, without freely talking about the loss or expressing sadness, anger and confusion, the child's recovery will be more difficult. Children model their emotional expression and behavior after their caregivers. It can be very helpful for a child to know that adults feel sad, too, and for you to share with them how you cope with in your own life. Over time, helping the child keep part of the loved one with them in memories, rituals, habits, beliefs, and behaviors can be very useful. The formal mourning rituals and beliefs of the child's culture or religion can be very helpful as well.

With that said, in traumatic death, especially if the child was a witness to the traumatic event, until the child can cope somewhat with the traumatic event, their capacity to mourn the loved one can be impaired. That is why it is not only ok to talk about the traumatic event, it is critical for the child long-term recovery of the child. The central issue becomes *how* you talk about it.

How should I talk about this event?

In the first few days or weeks following the trauma, caregivers should sit down with the child and tell them how it is very normal to think about the traumatic event. Adults should share some of their feelings and thoughts about the event as well. When discussing this issue with children, be sure to use age-appropriate language and explanations. The timing and language used are important. The child will very likely be very quiet. Don't worry about that. Immediately following the death, the child will not be very capable of processing complex or abstract information. Invite them to come and talk about it anytime they want. And from then on, let the child take the lead as to when, how long, and how much you talk with them about the trauma. Each child will have a different style of coping — some children will not talk much, some will talk about it to strangers. It is not unusual for a six-year-old to announce to her new kindergarten teacher, "My mother got shot." And it may not be unusual for a 15-year-old boy to never talk to *any* adults about the traumatic murder of his brother.

As the child gets further away from the event, she will be able to focus longer, digest more, and make more sense of what has happened. Don't be surprised if the child even acts as if the loved one is not dead or that "Mommy" will be coming back. Sometimes young children act as if they have not 'heard' anything you have said. It takes many individual moments of sad clarity for the reality of the loss to actually sink in for young children. Between these moments of harsh reality, children use a variety of coping techniques — some of which can be confusing or upsetting for adults.



Listen to the child, answer their questions as best you can. As you answer you can provide comfort and support. We often have no adequate explanations about senseless or traumatic death; it is just fine to tell children that you do not know why something happened or that you get confused and upset by it, too. In the end, listening and comforting a child without avoiding or over-reacting will have critical and long-lasting positive effects on the child's ability to cope with traumatic loss.

During this long process, the child continues to 're-experience' the loss. In play, drawing and words, the child may repeat, re-enact and re-live some elements of the traumatic loss. Surviving adults will hear children ask the same questions again and again. In addition, the child may develop profound "empathic" concerns for others experiencing loss, including cartoon characters and animals — "Where is Mickey Mouse's mother?" Or seeing a dead bird they may ask, "Who is taking care of the baby birds now?"

The child will experience and process the very same material differently at various times following the death. In the long run, the opportunity to process and re-process many times will facilitate healthy coping. This re-processing may take place throughout a given child's development. Even years after the death of a mother or a sibling, a child may 'revisit' the loss and struggle to understand it from their current developmental perspective.

One of the most important elements in this process is that children of different ages have different styles of adapting, and different abilities to understand abstract concepts such as death. Children at different ages have very different concepts of death; for example, very young children may have little appreciation of the finality of death. **Be sure not to associate sleep and death.** When these two become associated, it is not surprising that children become afraid of sleep. Children may become afraid of loved ones going to sleep. Try to get some understanding from the child of what she thinks death is — does she have a view of afterlife, are there specific fears about death and so forth. The more you understand about the child's concept of death, the easier it will be for you to communicate in a meaningful fashion.

Should I talk to others about the traumatic event?

Yes. If you and the child's caregivers feel it's appropriate, you can help to inform adults and children in the child's world what has happened. Let other teachers, counselors, parents of the child's friends, and, if appropriate, the child's peers know some of the pain that this child is living with. In some cases, older children can benefit by participating in this process. Sometimes this can help the people in the child's life be more patient, understanding or nurturing. People can often be intolerant or insensitive when dealing with the pain of a grieving child, sometimes asking, "Isn't it about time he got over this?" When you see that this is occurring, don't be shy about taking this person aside and helping him understand what the child is going through.

What is the difference between grief and mourning?

Grief is the label for the set of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical reactions that are seen following the death of a loved one. Normal grief responses may include denial, emotional numbing, anger, rage, rushes of anxiety (pangs), sadness, fear, confusion, difficulty sleeping, regression in children, stomach upset, loss of appetite, "hysterical materializations" (transient visual or auditory



misperceptions of the loved one's image or voice) and many other potential symptoms. These symptoms are similar to those often seen in the acute post-traumatic period.

Mourning is the formalized process of responding to the death. This includes memorial services, funerals, wakes, mourning dress and so forth. These semi-ritualized approaches are very useful in organizing and focusing the grief reaction in the immediate post-death period. It is important to allow children to participate in elements of this process. A major healing element of mourning is that it allows the grieving person to "have control over" the way in which trauma and loss are experienced. Rather than sitting alone with recurring intrusive thoughts about the death, one can, in a controlled fashion, recall the lost one without focusing on the death event. The degree of control in coping with a traumatic event is very important in determining how destructive the event becomes over time.

How long should grief last?

While grief is normal, persisting grief reactions are not. In the same way that a persisting acute reaction to trauma can signify major problems, so can persisting grief reactions. If the symptoms listed above last for six months or longer, or if the symptoms interfere with any aspect of functioning, they need to be addressed. If the child is in therapy, caregivers should communicate this with her therapist. You can also let the child's caregivers know whether school performance has been affected. Watch for changes in patterns of play and loss of interest in activities. Be observant. Be patient. Be tolerant. Be sympathetic. These children have been hurt and are in continuing pain.

Should I be concerned when a child says she hears her deceased father's voice?

Expect unusual "sensory" experiences. During the first six months following the loss, children (and adults) will often experience unusual visual, auditory, or tactile sensations. A child may think she hears her dead mother's voice in the next room; she may catch a glimpse of her mother in a crowded mall; out of the corner of her eye, the child may catch mother's reflection in a window. At bedtime or upon waking, these misperceptions are more common. They may be disturbing to parents, caregivers, and the child. Reassure the child. These 'visions' are often interpreted in context of a religious belief system — "Mommy came back to tell me it was okay; she is still with me." This can be important for the child, and there is no reason to undermine these feelings. These "hysterical materializations" are common, and often mislabeled as visual or auditory "hallucinations." If you have questions about these symptoms, discuss them with an experienced mental health professional or physician. It may also be helpful to speak directly with the child's caregivers about what is happening.

Do children understand events accurately?

Young children often make false assumptions about the causes of major events. Unfortunately these assumptions may include some sense that they were at fault for the event — including the death of a loved one. Adults often assume that causality is clear: someone dies in a car accident, is killed in a drive-by shooting, or dies in a fire. The child, however, may very easily distort an event, and come to the wrong conclusions about causality. "Mom died in the car accident because she was coming to get me at school. The other driver was mad at her;" "My brother is dead because he was helping me with my



homework. The person that shot my brother was really shooting at me, and it hit my brother because he was in my room.” “The fire was God’s way of punishing (or making an example of) my family.” In many of these distorted explanations, children assume some degree of responsibility for the death. This can lead to very destructive and inappropriate feelings of guilt. Try to correct any misperceptions immediately. And be prepared to correct these false, destructive ideas again and again.

Be clear. Explore the child's evolving sense of causality. Correct and clarify as you see false reasoning develop. Over time, the ability of the child to cope is related to the ability of the child to understand. While some elements of death and tragedy will always remain beyond understanding, explain this to the child: "I don't know some things we can never really understand." If the child feels that they share the unknown and unknowable with an adult, they feel safer. Don't let the child develop a sense that there is a secret about the event — this can be very destructive. Let the child know that adults cannot and will not understand some things either.

What can I do to help?

In summary, there are a number of important things you can do as a prominent figure in a child's life to help him cope with the loss he has suffered.

1. Be honest, open and clear.

Whenever possible, adults should give children the facts regarding the death. While there is no need to describe great lingering detail, the important details should be given. These may be horrifying, but it is always important to give factual information to the child. The imagination of a child will "fill in" the details if they are not given. Too often, these imagined details are distorted, inaccurate, and more horrifying than the actual details, and can ultimately interfere with the long-term healing process.

2. Do not avoid the topic when the child brings it up.

Similar to other trauma, the adults around the child need to be available when the child wants to talk, but should avoid probing when the child does not want to talk. This may mean answering one question, or struggling with a very difficult question. "Does it hurt when you burn to death?" Don't be surprised if in the middle of your struggle for the "right" answer, the child returns to play and acts disinterested. The child has been unable to tolerate the level of emotional intensity and is coping with it by avoiding it at that point.

Children will sense if the topic is emotionally difficult for adults around them. A child will try to please adults by either avoiding emotional topics or persisting with topics that she senses they find more pleasant. Try to gauge your own sense of discomfort and directly address this with the child. It is reassuring to children that they are not alone in some of their emotional upset.

Children look to adults to understand and interpret their own inner states. Younger children will even mirror the nature and intensity of an adult's emotions. So if you feel you will be unable to control your emotions when you are trying to help the child, you will need to use some coping strategies yourself. Take a few moments, collect yourself and then try to help the child. It is only human to lose control and



be very emotional in these moments. After you feel more composed, you can help the child understand how you were overcome with emotion, "Just like you feel sometimes." Explain that you struggle to understand too — that "We need to help each other when we are sad."

3. Be prepared to discuss the same details again and again.

Expect to hear things from the child that seems as if they didn't "hear" you when you told them the first time. The powerful, pervasive implications of death for the child can be overwhelming indeed. The child's responses to death of a parent, sibling, or other loved one will be similar to the child's responses to other traumatic events. This will include emotional numbing, avoidance, sadness, regression, episodic manifestations of anger, frustration, fear of the unknown (e.g., the future), helplessness, and confusion.

The child will have recurring, intrusive, and emotionally evocative recollections of the loved one, and about the death of the loved one. If there is no clear image of the death, the child will imagine various scenarios. These images will return over and over again. As they do, the child (if she feels safe and supported by the adults around her) will ask about death, the specifics of the death, and the loved one. Patiently, repeat clear, honest facts for the child. If you don't know something — or if you also have wondered about the nature of death or a detail in this specific loss — tell the child. Help the child explore possible explanations, and help the child understand that you and others can and do live with many unknowns. In this process, let the child know, however, that there are things we do know — things we can understand. Bring positive memories, images and recollections of the loved one into the conversation.

4. Be available, nurturing, reassuring, and predictable.

All of these things make the child's work easier. She feels safe and cared for. The loss of parents, siblings and other loved ones is extremely traumatic, and will forever change these children's lives. The child has, in some sense, a lifelong task of working, re-working — experiencing and re-experiencing the loss of these loved ones. Each holiday, each family occasion, will bring the loss, the death, and the ghost of the loved one to this child. Available, nurturing, and caring caregivers, teachers, therapists, and caseworkers will all make this journey easier.

5. Understand that surviving children often feel guilty.

A child surviving when family members die may often feel guilty. This can be a very destructive and pervasive belief. The guilt children feel is related to the false assumptions they make about the event. An important principle in this process is that children do not know how to verbalize or express guilt in the same fashion as adults. Guilt, as expressed by children, may often be best observed in behaviors and emotions that are related to self-hatred and self-destruction. The child will not likely be able to articulate that survivor guilt is intimately related to their sense of worthlessness or self-abusive/destructive behaviors.

The children surviving a parent's sudden death will have great survivor guilt. "Was there something wrong or bad about me? I could have been there — I should have been there." These thoughts will recur in any variety of permutations. And most of the time, the outcome of these thoughts will be guilt. If



these children's caregivers, teachers, and therapists can minimize these potentially escalating and destructive ideas, the child's recovery will be eased.

6. Take advantage of other resources. There are many other well-trained professionals willing to help you and the child in your care with these problems. Take advantage of them. Always remember that the loss does not go away, but the way children experience loss will change with time, hopefully maturing in ways that make it easier to bear. The traumatic loss of a parent, a sibling, and a peer will always be with these children. With time, love, and understanding, however, children can learn to carry the burdens of traumatic loss in ways that will not interfere with their healthy development.



Possible Grief Reactions in Children

Children are unique in their grief responses. Their reactions depend upon many factors including age, personality, their relationship with the deceased, environmental influences, culture, and religious beliefs. Some grief reactions children may experience include the following:

1. **Sadness and Loneliness.**
2. **Denial:** “He will come back,” or “She is just lost.”
3. **Bodily Distress:** Tightness in throat or chest, loss of appetite, loss of energy, stomach aches, sleeping problems, headaches. Some may worry they have the same illness as the deceased. It is very important to have all ailments checked out by a doctor.
4. **Anger:** A normal and healthy grief reaction that needs to be expressed appropriately.
5. **Guilt:** Some children believe that they somehow ‘caused’ the death because they misbehaved, they argued with deceased, etc. Children who may have resented the upcoming birth of a sibling may feel responsible if the baby dies. They need constant reassurance that they are not responsible for the death.
6. **Depression:** Feeling helpless, lethargic, apathetic, alone, withdrawn, empty, and irritable are some indications of depression.
7. **Idealization of Deceased:** “Mommy was perfect.” “Daddy would have let me.”
8. **Assumption of Mannerisms of Deceased:** “Do I look like him?” Child may try to imitate walking or talking patterns of the deceased.
9. **Anxiety & Fear:** “I feel like Daddy when he died—my stomach aches.” “My hand hurts. Will this turn into cancer?” Child may suddenly become fearful of things such as monsters, the dark, and separation.
10. **Panic:** Will worry about who will take care of them, and will worry about something tragic happening to remaining caretakers. Need constant reassurance that they are loved and will not be abandoned.
11. **Regression:** Occasionally some children may regress to younger behavior patterns such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting, and “baby-talk.”
12. **School Problems:** It’s not uncommon for children who are grieving to have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork. Some “acting out” behavior may also occur as children attempt to deal with grief, especially anger. A counselor, psychologist, or supportive teacher can be a great asset at this time.



WHAT CHILDREN THINK ABOUT DEATH

Our knowledge of what is going on in the mind of a child will give us an idea of how to communicate with him. At what level of development is the child? What will the child understand, what will confuse him, and what will satisfy his questions? It's up to us to be cognizant of this so we can present the message in a way that our children can understand. One thing children don't need is to be loaded down with explicit details about the death. Simple explanations are best. Assessing the situation, judging age and maturity will help you know what is appropriate. Please consult the chart enclosed in this packet for guidelines on child development at various ages.

How we deliver the message makes a difference too, especially to the child who has lost a loved one. During a time of crisis, children need to rely on adults who feel confident and in charge of the aftermath. They need to rely on us for information and the support they need.

The Importance of Communication

If the death is handled well, it can give a point of reference for the child when faced with other losses, which will inevitably come at some point in life. If the child is told the simple truth, and is given the opportunity to remember the person through a memorial, by writing poems or stories, art projects, or by participating in simple discussions about feelings and memories, the child will have a starting point for future encounters with death.

Children are very literal thinkers. In addition, their thinking is very much influenced by their surroundings—colored by what is seen and heard. Consider what the average youngster sees on TV. Why do we try to shield them from death and avoid talking with them about death? For fear we will upset them? Children have many visions of death from cartoons, movies, and the news. It is up to us to straighten out the myths and the magic of Hollywood from the truth. This is especially true for kids under six, so they don't expect their loved one to pop up like Wile E. Coyote, after being killed, ready for another go at the Roadrunner.

"Whispers are terrible to a child," says child psychiatrist Hal Fishkin, who works with bereaved children in New York City. "Whispers, secrets, fairy tales...It's really condescending, patronizing to assume children can't deal with the traumas we can. Having experienced some major losses without data in my own life, I can tell you it's a rather mind-maiming experience. It makes you come up with conclusions in your own little head that are not consonant with reality. Something terrible has happened and it's all your fault. The fantasy is always worse than the reality."



Correcting Misconceptions About Death

One way to find out just what your youngster is thinking is by listening to her explanations to another child. “Grandma’s walking the earth,” one seven-year-old explained. She seemed upset that a ghost may be dropping by. Scary television shows, coupled with the news of Grandma in the spirit world, combined to give this child a scary point of reference.

Once we know what the child believes, we can then explain the hazy points. Active listening will often reward us with clues such as these so that we can ease the child’s troubled mind and re-direct thoughts.

Talk like a child when explaining. Stoop down, put him on your lap, look into his eyes, and talk to him in his language. Listen as you would to a good friend going through a crisis, looking beyond words. Listen with your heart. Find out what he knows and what he’s experienced.

Remember that each child is an individual. Most of them do think about death and are concerned about it. Studies show that children wrestle with their fears about it without telling their parents, burying their thoughts and feelings just as adults do. Don’t assume because your child isn’t talking about it, that he isn’t thinking about it. After experiencing a death, he may be fearful to be left at home when the parent is out for the evening. Will mom or dad disappear from his life like the family dog did?

Children can misunderstand what is being said. Often, a child makes up the part of the message that’s missing. The reasoning gets twisted. Watch for opportunities to set the record straight for your child— by listening and responding honestly to the fears.

TWO TO SIX YEARS OLD

For the young child, the world is a magical place, centered on the family, his world. Concepts of time and death are not fully developed in his mind—he simply can’t grasp them. What is understood are the day-to-day things in life, and the feelings of security of his family around him.

This child will draw on what is known. He imitates adults, wears their shoes and holds their keys, all while trying to see how a grown-up feels. Young children are sensitive to our attitudes. He can pick up on feelings and act just like us. If we are open, honest, warm and loving, he will get the message that’s the way to be.



Children in this age group do not generally think that death is final; death is reversible in their minds. A youngster has yet to recognize that she is a separate person from her parents, that without them she can still exist. Older children can grasp this, but a youngster can't. It's partly because of the magical world she creates that she gets the courage to deal with the problems of life. In her imagination, the child fashions a set of powers that counter the disquieting facts seen all around.

That's why it is so important to not allow a child's thinking to distort an incident out of proportion. When we say Grandma just went to sleep and died, the child may wonder if she will meet the same awful fate, and she may balk at bedtime. For parents to help their children, they must be aware that things like this may be going on in their child's head. The experience of death is probably new and strange, and the feelings of confusion and guilt when experiencing death may be overwhelming.

Be prepared for your child to read emotions around him, respond to body language, overhear conversations, and question events either directly or indirectly. Control the message, avoiding the inevitable misinformation he is likely to formulate. Give him accurate information, geared for his age and maturity, in language he can understand. Keep it simple. Acknowledge feelings and let him know it's okay to be sad. Tell him all he is feeling is how a person is supposed to feel when a loved one dies. Use clear language, listen for feedback, and respond sensitively.

Check out the grief response sheet included in this packet for symptoms of distress that may go beyond normal grief. If needed, consult WinterSpring for help or referrals.



ACTIVITIES FOR GRIEVING KIDS THREE TO FIVE YEARS

PUNCHING BAG

GOAL: To release energy, and to provide anger release and control.

BENEFIT: Physical activity before moving into a quieter activity is helpful in many ways. Children often feel powerless, and benefit from prevailing in a powerful way.

DESCRIPTION: An adult holds punching bag, bop toy, large pillow, or bean bag chair firmly while a child runs against it. Small children can sit on it and pound it. Without praising, reflect back what is occurring, such as “You are really pounding on that thing!”

CREATE A FRAME

GOAL: To show the importance of memories and remembering a loved one.

BENEFIT: For young children who are unable to write, art is a wonderful way to express feelings. Being able to create something from their loss validates all they are feeling.

DESCRIPTION: Using the child’s favorite photo, create a frame out of cardboard, and let her decorate it with stickers, items from nature, jewels, markers, feathers, or anything that seems meaningful to her.

PLAN A MEMORIAL

GOAL: To empower the child with the ability to choose what will comfort him.

BENEFIT: Giving children a release from pent-up emotions within the safety limits of the ritual.

DESCRIPTION: Talk to the child, and ask what favorite activities he enjoyed with his loved one. Help him create a grief ritual involving the activity. For example, if the person loved the circus, color animals on a helium filled balloon and release it into the sky. If the memory involves the ocean, plan a visit, and perhaps leave special shells, rocks or treasures on the beach to be washed out to sea. Be creative, and do your best to indulge the child’s ideas.

Other ideas....

- pounding on play-doh
- playing music, singing and dancing,
- making a video with the child as the “star”
- taking walks, using nature as a guide to life and death



How do you feel today?

mad



happy



sad



lonely



scared



Tell someone!



Feelings and Colors

Age level: All

Time required: 30min

Materials needed: Paper, crayons, felt pens and (optional) black letter for children to trace

Goals:

To learn names within the group in a fun way. Also, to acknowledge that different feelings make people think of different colors and that we all have lots of different feelings at the same time.

Description of Activity:

1. Identify and discuss six to eight feelings.
Examples: Happiness, sadness, anger, jealousy, guilt, silliness, pride, love, etc.).
2. Ask for experiences that indicate these feelings along with a color for each feeling (i.e., happy/yellow, sad/brown).
3. Each child then colors the letters of his/her name using different colors to represent the many feelings they have. Facilitators should explain that different children will use different colors to represent the same feelings (i.e., red may be a mad color for one child and a love color for another).
4. Invite each child to share his/ her drawings.



Triggers

Age level: 5+

Time required: 30min

Materials needed: None

Goals:

To provide children an opportunity to share their memories and feelings about their loved one and to discover when these are brought unexpectedly into their awareness.

Description of Activity:

1. Facilitators ask the children to share times when they suddenly think of the person who died and what reminded them of that person (i.e., a place, a smell, a person, a special activity, etc.).
Example: "Whenever I go to the bakery I think of my Mom because she baked bread," or "when I see a policeman I think of Dad because a policeman told us about Dad's accident."
2. The group can also discuss what they do when this happens (i.e., do they write it down, draw a picture, tell someone, etc.).

