

## **HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH DEATH**

Children grieve just as adults do when a loved one dies. However, it can be difficult to know how to help a child cope with the loss, particularly as other family members work through their own grief.

It is hard to know how a child will react to death. Most young children are aware of death, even if they don't understand it. Some children may have had friends who have already lost a loved one. But experiencing grief firsthand is a different and often confusing process for children. As a parent you can't protect a child from the pain of loss, but you can help a child go through the grieving process. A child's capacity to understand death and your approach to discussing it will vary, according to the child's age.

- Children ages 2-7 often see death as temporary. So explain death in basic and concrete terms. Don't volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. With a child of this age remind the child that the loved one has died and will not be coming back. Even after you have explained, young children may continue to ask where the loved one is or when the person is returning. Continue to calmly reiterate that the person has died and can't come back.
- From the ages of 7 to 12 children grasp the finality of death. They deal best with death when given accurate, simple, clear, and honest explanations about what happened.
- As a teen's understanding about death evolves, questions may come up about mortality and vulnerability. Teens also tend to look for meaning in the death of someone close to them. Some teens tend to experience some guilt, particularly if one of their peers died. Whatever your teen is experiencing, the best thing you can do as a parent is to encourage the expression and sharing of grief.

As children learn how to deal with death, they need space, understanding, and patience to grieve in their own way. They might not show grief as an adult would. A young child might not cry or might react to the news by acting out or becoming hyperactive. A teen might act annoyed and might feel more comfortable confiding in peers. Whatever their reactions, don't take it personally.

When a death occurs children need support from their parents, caregivers, and other adults in their lives. The death of a loved one can profoundly affect a child's sense of security. In the case of traumatic death, the confusion and fear is even greater. It is important to show your emotions as it reassures children that feeling sad or upset is okay. Create an atmosphere of comfort and openness, and send the message that there is no right or wrong way to feel. Don't attempt to sooth or stifle the emotions of

the griever. Tears and anger are an important part of the healing process. Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is the result of a strong relationship and deserves the honor of strong emotion.

Watch for any signs that children need help coping with a loss. Signs of grieving in children and adolescents can be the following:

Sadness	Denial, shock, and confusion	Anger or irritability
Inability to sleep	Nightmares	Loss of appetite
Fear of being alone	Loss of concentration	Depression
Guilt over failure to prevent the loss	Lose interest in daily activities and events	
Withdrawal from friends	Refusal to attend school	
Sharp drop in school performance	Becoming aggressive	
Temper tantrums	Inventing games about dying	
Making repeated statements of wanting to join the deceased		
Frequent physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches		

Be aware that children need time to grieve and be upset. Let them know you are available to listen when they are ready to talk. Provide reassurance and validate their feelings when they express them.

If you notice that your child seems unusually upset and unable to cope with a loss it is a good idea to consult your child's school guidance counselor, doctor, a psychologist, or other licensed mental health professional if you feel that your child isn't recovering from a loss in a healthy way.

Parents can't always shield children from sadness and losses. But helping them learn to cope with them builds emotional resources they can rely on throughout life.

## REFERENCES, RESOURCES TO CONTACT & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Child Mind Institute (<http://support.childmind.org/site/DocServer/Child-Mind-Institute-Trauma-Guide-2015-updated.pdf>)
- KidsHealth ([http://kidshealth.org/PageManager.jsp?dn=KidsHealth&lic=1&ps=107&cat\\_id=145&article\\_set=21576](http://kidshealth.org/PageManager.jsp?dn=KidsHealth&lic=1&ps=107&cat_id=145&article_set=21576))
- Cancer Care ([http://www.cancercare.org/publications/52-helping\\_children\\_who\\_have\\_lost\\_a\\_loved\\_one](http://www.cancercare.org/publications/52-helping_children_who_have_lost_a_loved_one))
- Article: HealthyChildren.org – How Children Understand Death & What You Should Say
- Helping Children Cope With Death ([http://journeyofhearts.org/grief/kids\\_death.html](http://journeyofhearts.org/grief/kids_death.html))
- Helping Yourself and Others Deal With Death (<http://www.healthyplace.com/depression/articles/helping-yourself-and-others-deal-with-death/print/>)

**If you need immediate assistance contact the  
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255  
Colorado Crisis & Support Line 1-844-493-8255**