



SUPPORTING CHILDREN DURING THE GRIEVING PROCESS

The COVID-19 virus has changed many aspects of our society. One of these changes is how we are able to say goodbye to someone we love following their death. Due to restrictions at hospitals and nursing homes, we may not be able to be with those we love for their final moments, and we may not be able to say goodbyes in person. Funerals, celebrations of life, and memorial services are part of the grieving process because they allow people to support each other as they say goodbye and provide a sense of closure for loved ones. These gatherings are often a social process where people share memories, tell stories, hold hands as they cry, and comfort each other. However, due to social distancing, the social aspects of grieving have changed significantly. This can be difficult for children and families and may require support. Children may have to deal with death due to COVID-19, other medical conditions, accidents, or natural causes. Regardless of how someone dies, it can be difficult to explain it to your child – especially now. The age and developmental stage of your child will impact their understanding, reaction, and need for support following the death of a friend or family member. See the chart below on Developmental Stages and Grief.

HOW TO TELL YOUR CHILD SOMEONE THEY LOVE HAS DIED

Even though we know that death is inevitable, it can be difficult to talk about, especially with children. Be prepared to be honest and answer a lot of questions.

- Share that the person has died or passed away. You want to be honest, however, you do not need to go into great detail or share all the facts.
- Reassure your child that they will be okay and that their needs will be met.
- Explain that you are there to care for, help, and support them.
- Identify the other trusted adults who can help them with their grief.

- Give them choices. Do not force them to talk about it if they are not ready. Offer support and reassure them that you will listen when they are ready to talk.
- Provide outlets such as play, drawing, journaling, singing.
- Be honest and do not make promises you cannot keep. For example, your child may want you to promise that you will never die. Reassure them that you will always love them and will always make sure they are cared for.

CREATE A NEW WAY TO SAY GOODBYE

Children find comfort in routines and rituals. Many children associate a funeral or celebration of life as an expected ritual for saying goodbye. However, many funerals or services cannot be held or attended by a large number of people. Families may not be able to be together during this time as they normally would. Therefore, it is important to consider different and creative ways to say goodbye.

- **Create a memorial ceremony at home**
 - Begin with opening words or a poem
 - Play music, have children help select music to remember the loved one
 - Share stories or fond memories, encourage children to share only if they feel comfortable
 - Children can create a memorial such as a card or drawing
 - Share gratitude through words, writing, drawing, and/or singing
- **Children can commemorate the loved one by creating a memory or memorial**
 - Make a card or letter for their loved one
 - Draw a picture of a favorite memory
 - Create a picture frame for a special picture
 - Create a memory box for special tokens or memorability from their loved one



HELPING CHILDREN GRIEVE

Grief is a very individual process. It may be confusing and overwhelming. You can support your child's grief by being accessible and allowing them to openly express their feelings.

- Allow children to express their feelings - avoid correcting their feelings or telling them they should not feel that way.
- Allow them to ask questions - they may ask questions repeatedly because they need answers, reassurance, and support.
- Allow them to share thoughts and feelings openly.
- Allow them to be included - isolation may cause fear and uncertainty.

Parent Tip: Grieving is a normal and natural process. However, there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Everyone, including children, has their own comfort level with talking about their grief. There is no absolute formula for how to talk with your child, however, there are some tips that can facilitate communication

- **Be available to your child.** Things can be very hectic after a death. There are arrangements to take care of, legal matters to deal with, and family and friends to notify. The adults may be busy and preoccupied with responsibilities. In the midst of all of the chaos, let your child know that even though you are very busy taking care of things, you are always there for them. You may have to “schedule” time together. The important thing is to let your child know you are there and you care.
- **Listen carefully.** Children do not always need sage advice or words of wisdom. Sometimes they just need you to listen, truly listen. Do not feel compelled to find the words to “fix” everything. Sometimes it is okay to listen and say nothing. The silence may provide an opportunity for your child to continue to share.
- **Go where the conversation takes you.** Do not feel that you have to direct the conversation with a specific end in mind. Instead pick up on the cues your child is giving and let that lead the way. Validate what your child is sharing and reflect back their feelings.
- **Be yourself.** It is okay to share your thoughts and feelings. Children need to know that parents have emotions, too. Modeling sharing appropriate feelings can help children understand that it is okay for them to share their feelings as well.
- **Use open-ended questions.** To help start conversations it can be helpful to ask open ended questions. Do not interrogate your child with who, what, where, why questions. Instead, you could ask them tell you about something they enjoyed doing today and follow up by asking what else happened or “tell me more” responses.
- **Seize the moment.** Find the times when conversations come more naturally. When taking a walk or driving in the car, it may be more natural to have a conversation.
- **Create a conversation spot.** Find a comfortable and relaxing place to just sit and talk. Explain that this is safe place where everyone can share their thoughts and feelings. You may start by reading a book together, discuss the story, and then let the conversation continue into real life events.



DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES AND GRIEF

Children: Age 2 and under	Children this young do not have a concept of death or loss. They may or may not have memories of the person. However, they can sense parental emotions and differences in routines. They may become fussy and clingy. They will require support including hugs, cuddles, and attention.
Children: Ages 2 - 5	Children this age do not understand the permanence of death, they consider it a temporary situation and believe the person will return. There is no fear of death, instead there is fear of separation. They may feel and express sadness, however, they often play and interact as if nothing happened. Some children will have an understanding of an afterlife. Children may display a regression in behavior such as bedwetting or thumb sucking. They may be fearful of separation from other loved ones, have problems sleeping, display anger or aggression, and be non-compliant. They will need structure, routine and reassurance. They will have many questions to be answered. It is okay to use words like dead or died. Children this age need to feel heard.
Children: Ages 6 - 9	There is an understanding of the permanence of death. This often results in fear and worry about others dying. Children may think that they were the cause of the death due to their "bad behavior" or magical thoughts. Children's grief may be exhibited with aggression, fear, phobias, physical complaints, regressive behaviors, and being possessive of loved ones. Support can be provided by allowing them to express their feeling through words, art, music, or drawing. Listen carefully and be prepared to answer questions. They will need love, reassurance, and affirmation.
Children: Ages 10 - 12	Children this age have a realistic understanding about the permanence of death. They will be interested in facts and details. They want to know details about how they will be taken care of, what changes are in store for their daily life, and what will happen in the future. They are very aware of the impact the death has had on their life and the life of the family members. They often want to place blame and want someone to fix things. They may have difficulty sleeping, trouble with concentration, and start doing poorly in school. To support their grief, allow them to express their feelings without restriction. However, you may need to discuss appropriate ways to express feelings, such as yelling into a pillow if you are angry or punching the mattress when frustrated. They will need to know there is someone there to listen. Let them know you are there to hear them and help them.
Teenagers: Ages 13 - 18	Teenagers understand that everyone will die; death is inevitable. This can lead to concern about the fragility of life and their own vulnerability. Teens may talk about death; however, they often hide feelings or succumb to peer pressure. They may consider and question religious and philosophical beliefs. When grieving, they may display anger, fear, aggression, phobias, and physical complaints. Some teens may begin engaging in risky behaviors such as using drugs and alcohol, defiance, promiscuity, and delinquent behaviors. You can support your teen through their grief by sharing feelings openly and working together to learn to manage feelings. Let your teen know you are always there for them, no matter what they say or do. While teens often turn to friends for support, it is important to help your teen identify the trusted adults that can support and help them. It is essential to be aware of any indication of suicidal thoughts and seek help immediately.

Professional help may be appropriate for a child, teenage or adult to help them deal with the death of a loved one.