

When Your Child Is Grieving

A Guide for Caregivers

At some point, we all experience grief: And while grief is a normal part of life, supporting someone who is grieving is *hard* - especially when it's your child. However, there's good evidence that children who are supported in their grief can improve their connections with others, make meaning of what happened, and grow their overall resilience.

Below are some general tips to guide you as you support your child when they are experiencing grief and loss. Adapt these suggestions to fit the specific needs and preferences of your family.

Ground yourself first

- Especially if you are grieving the same event as your child - it is crucial that you have enough of what you need when supporting them.

Use clear, straightforward, and age-appropriate language

- When telling children difficult news it can be tempting to soften our language or use metaphors to explain what happened. However, because children can be more literal thinkers, this kind of language may actually create more confusion or distress. Instead, simply and directly explain what happened.

Welcome them in expressing feelings

- Talk about the process of grief, and normalize a wide range of feelings including anger, sadness, and guilt. Encourage your child to express their feelings through talk, journaling, art, music, movement, and play. Just listen to their feelings without trying to fix or downplay their experience.

Invite their questions, but you don't have to have all the answers

- While sharing difficult news, you can learn more about your child's needs by offering, "Ask me what questions you have about this"; this approach models to your child that questions about grief are okay.
- Remember that it's okay if you don't have all the answers to your child's questions - what matters most is being present with them and their emotions.

Grief isn't linear

- This is true for everyone, but especially for children. They will likely have a delayed emotional response to their loss and their feelings will come in waves at unpredictable times, especially if they encounter a reminder of the loss.
- For younger children, behavior is one of their main ways of communicating about their feelings, and an increase in behavioral challenges is a normal part of a child's grief process.

Even when someone dies or leaves a child's life, you can still be connected to them

- Remind your child that we always carry our memories and love for a person, even after they are gone.
- Make sure that your child understands that it is okay to still talk about the loved one; keep photos visible and talk about your loved one in your daily life.

Foster connection

- Make one-on-one time with your child and have regular family time through shared, enjoyed activities like family meals or games.
- Increase positive connections such as physical affection and loving words.
- Lean into friends, community, and the activities that your child enjoys and that give them a sense of connection and self-worth (like sports, music, and time with friends).

Focus on what you can control

- Help your child to focus on the things that they can control in their daily life.
- It can be tempting to become more permissive and to let go of routines when a child is experiencing grief in order to help soothe their difficult feelings; however, balancing warm, loving parenting while maintaining consistency and healthy boundaries will help a child feel safe.

Other resources to consider

- **Access your local support networks** be that with a religious/spiritual institution, local community center, or directly with friends & family.
- Consider starting **individual, couples, and/or family therapy** to address the needs arising because of the grief and loss. Children do well if you are able to support them, they don't always need their own individual therapist following a loss.
- **Support groups** can be a very helpful space to normalize their experience and build connections with others who have experienced loss; especially if of a similar kind.

Adapted from the work of Megan Devine (psychotherapist & author, also known as @RefugeInGrief); as well as Haine, R. A., Ayers, T. S., Sandler, I. N., & Wolchik, S. A. (2008). Evidence-based practices for parentally bereaved children and their families. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 39(2), 113–121. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.39.2.113>

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