

# Helping Children Cope With Grief



**W**hether it strikes suddenly or after a long battle with illness, the death of a friend or loved one affects children in many ways.

While you, as a parent, may be coping with the loss, keep in mind that it is important to help your child with grief, too. During difficult times, it's easy to forget about school and other responsibilities. But if you work together, you and your child will find a way to stay on track. Here you'll find information about what your child may be going through and some ways you can help.

**QuickTips**

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## What Can You Do to Help Your Child Cope?

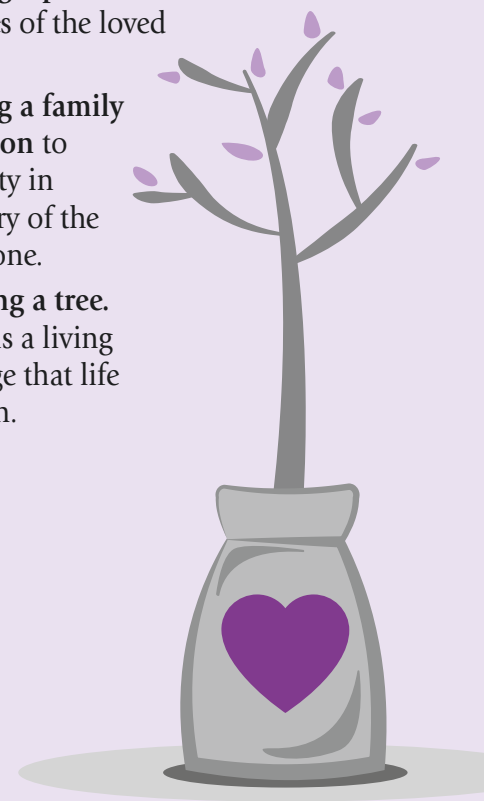


- **Stay close to your child.** Your physical presence provides comfort and reassurance. Give plenty of hugs. Take extra time at bedtime to sit close and emphasize that your child is loved and safe.
- **Try to maintain normal routines to the extent possible.** Knowing what to expect will reassure your child.
- **Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your child.** These activities are calming and foster a sense of closeness and security.
- **Observe your child's emotional state.** Children express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.
- **Stay in touch with your child's teachers** so they can work with you to help your child.
- **Safeguard your child's health.** Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure you and your child get appropriate sleep, exercise and nutrition.

### Suggest Different Ways to Grieve

Your child's creative side can help during this difficult period. Your child may find comfort in:

- **Writing a poem.**
- **Composing a song.**
- **Drawing a picture.**
- **Making a photo album** filled with pictures of the loved one.
- **Making a family donation** to a charity in memory of the loved one.
- **Planting a tree.** A tree is a living message that life goes on.



## Keep Your Child's Age in Mind

As you talk with your child, it's important to make your explanations age-appropriate.

- **An early elementary school child** needs brief, simple information about what has happened.
- **An upper elementary or early middle school child** will be more vocal in asking questions and may have a better understanding of the finality of death.
- **An upper middle school or high school student** might be reluctant to display feelings. Make sure your child has another trusted adult, such as a school counselor, religious advisor, relative or neighborhood parent to turn to.

Regardless of age, encourage your child to talk about thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener. Remind your child that you are available to talk and listen—and to just be there.



## Talk About the Loss of a Loved One

Unfortunately, grief is a part of life. Your child may experience grief over the death of a beloved family member, a classmate, a friend or a pet. Your child may even experience grief over tragic world events. Talking about feelings is the best way to help your child get through this tough time.

Here are some ideas that may help:

- **Be honest.** Your child needs to be able to count on you for the truth.
- **Be sensitive to your child's fears.** If the person died in a hospital, your child may be afraid of going to the hospital. Talk about the good care people receive from doctors and nurses.
- **Share your family's beliefs.** Your values will comfort you and your child.
- **Let your child know that it's okay to be sad.** Even anger is okay, but your child may need your help and patience in expressing these feelings appropriately. Help your child put them into perspective.
- **Express your own sorrow.** Your child needs to know that you are very sad about what happened and that you understand you are *both* grieving. Remember, you can never say, "I love you," too many times!

## Does Your Child Need More Help?

Here are some signs that your child may be having a serious problem with grief:

- A long period of depression.
- Lack of interest in things that your child used to love.
- Loss of appetite.
- Inability to sleep.
- Aggressive emotional outbursts.
- Excessively imitating the deceased person.
- Making remarks about wanting to join the deceased person.
- Marked drop in grades or refusal to go to school.

Mental health experts agree that if you continue to see one or more of these signs, your child may be having a serious problem with grief. If you are concerned that your child's problems may be serious, seek professional help right away.

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