



“Children feel, even if they do not understand.  
Understanding comes later ...  
the feelings need a hug”

Doug Manning

## Helping Children Grieve



It may be very difficult for grieving parents to find the strength to help their other children, especially in the first weeks after their loss. But children need to know that their grief is normal, and they need to express what they're feeling. You may want to ask other adults in your circle of family and friends to assist and support you during this time of pain and sorrow.

- ◆ Give children permission to express their feelings. They often withhold their feelings because they think that talking about the death will cause pain to others. Tell them that grief is a normal way of coping with a devastating loss.
- ◆ Ease the way for them. Children and adolescents may not have the words to explain what they're going through. Here are some suggested ways adults can provide children with opportunities to release feelings:
  - ◆ Rituals – candle lighting, praying
  - ◆ Artistic expression – drawing a picture of how you feel
  - ◆ Sharing memories and stories together
  - ◆ Remembering your loved one and crying together.
- ◆ Listen carefully to what your children say. Paying attention helps them know that their feelings are normal as they attempt to come to terms with the loss.
- ◆ Allow your children to teach you about their experience of grief and give them permission to let you know what they need.

### Be alert for children exhibiting these reactions:

- ◆ Aggressive behavior
- ◆ Withdrawal, or very passive behavior
- ◆ Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- ◆ Prolonged periods of weeping
- ◆ Changes in school grades
- ◆ Symptoms associated with the illness or injury of the deceased
- ◆ Repeated expressions of guilt or fear

**You may want to seek help if these reactions are persistent and ongoing.**



## WHAT GRIEF LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE

Grief affects people at many levels, regardless of age. Both adults and children who are grieving experience some of the following natural and normal grief responses.

Bear in mind:

- Children and teens experience these grief-related responses from the vantage point of their own developmental capacities and they will respond accordingly
- Each person's combination of reactions is unique and will shift in the course of the grieving process

*Emotional responses may include:*

shock/numbness	sadness
anxiety/panic	sense of relief
anger	feeling unreal, dazed
fearfulness/insecurity	sense of yearning
loneliness	confusion/conflicting emotions
helplessness	mood swings
hopelessness	irritability

*Thought and perceptual patterns may include:*

guilt/regrets  
shame/low self-esteem  
difficulty concentrating and remembering  
generalized confusion/difficulty making decisions  
chronic worrying  
envy/resentfulness of non-grievors and/or people trying to help  
vivid, frightening dreams  
seeing, sending, hearing, smelling the person who died  
disbelief that a person is really dead/concerns about afterlife  
constant intrusive thoughts about the deceased

*Physical reactions may include:*

heaviness and/or tightness in the throat, stomach, chest, legs, arms  
lightheadedness/dizziness  
loss of, or increase in, appetite  
sense of fatigue or weakness  
feeling restless/jittery  
desire to sleep a great deal and/or difficulty sleeping  
health concerns that mirror the illness of the person who died  
increased sensitivity to heat, cold and/or changes in weather  
headaches/stomachaches/difficulty swallowing

*Behavioral/social responses may include:*

disorientation	withdrawal/detachment/loss of interest
listlessness/apathy	acting strangely/scatterbrained
crying/whimpering	regression to earlier behaviors
irritability/angry outbursts	difficulty with relationships/social situations
clinginess to people, objects, places	clumsiness/absentmindedness

*The following responses are not uncommon for children:*

under or over-reacting to situations	engaging in risky behavior/testing limits
clowning around/distracting behavior	rough and/or destructive play

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*"You have to feel the pain before you can come to grips with it." ~ Anonymous*

*Parent On-Line Resources:*

*Children and Grief:* [www.scholastic.com/childrenandgrief](http://www.scholastic.com/childrenandgrief)

*National Alliance for Grieving Children:* [www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org](http://www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org)



## CHILDREN AND GRIEF

### MISCONCEPTIONS

They don't understand what happened.

I must protect them from loss and pain.

They don't feel grief the way adults do.

I'm afraid I'll say or do the wrong thing.

They won't want to talk about it.

I don't want to upset them.

They are too young to understand.

I won't mention it unless they do.

Once they feel sad/mad that's the end of it.

### FACTS

Even the very young know when those around them are upset.

This statement protects adults from having to deal with a difficult topic. All children experience loss and need guidance to deal effectively with loss.

Everyone, children and adults, grieves in their own way. Developmental levels affect understanding, but grief still takes place.

There are no standard right answers and it's okay for children to know you are grieving too. Saying anything acknowledges their grief and opens the lines of communication.

Often it is all they want to talk about. Either way, it needs to be an option.

They are already upset and being isolated in your grief only adds to their confusion and fear.

A child who loves is a child who grieves.

This sends a message that the person lost is forgotten or that it's not okay to miss them or talk about them. They may interpret this to mean the person is bad or death is unspeakable.

Grief is circular and all feelings (denial, fear, sadness, anger, guilt) are likely to reappear intermittently.



It is morbid to talk about the body.

Getting rid of reminders is helpful.

Use euphemisms like "passed away" or "gone to heaven" or "sleeping peacefully"

If they are not talking about it or crying then they are not grieving.

Going to funerals is upsetting and inappropriate for children.

Keeping busy will help them bounce back.

I don't know enough about this topic to explain or answer questions.

Children are naturally curious about what happens to the body after death. It is important to answer all questions directly and to separate what happens to the body from your spiritual beliefs.

This sends a strong message that the person and the role they played in the child's life should be forgotten.

While these expressions are often the first to pop into our head, they are often confusing and misleading to children who think in literal terms. Children may wait for the "lost" person to be found or for them to wake up or they may wish to visit them in heaven.

Children grieve intermittently and work through many of their feelings in play. They may also be watching you for cues as to how and when to grieve.

Being left out of formal rituals can be both confusing and disturbing to children. Besides closure, participation in these rituals allows children to learn by example how we grieve. Important reminder - children need info on services prior to attending and should have a person they can talk to if questions arise while they are there.

Routine is important especially during a period of loss, however, new activities designed to distract may only confuse and overwhelm the grieving child.

Honesty and sincerity go a long way in Any discussion about death. You need not have all the answers, only a willingness to listen, share, and hug.