

# Supporting Children

Through Grief and Loss



**UC DAVIS**  
**HEALTH**

**CHILDREN'S**  
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# A Guide to Help Your Family Through Loss

Every child grieves differently after a loss. It can be hard to know how to help. This guide offers tips from experts on how to support children before, during, and after the death of someone close.

## Definitions

**Grief:** A normal reaction to loss. Everyone feels grief in their own way. It can affect your mind, body, and feelings.

**Mourning:** This is how you show your grief to the world, like at a funeral or a memorial service.

**Bereavement:** This is the name for the period of time after a death when you are grieving.

**Loss:** When someone dies.

**Caregivers:** Caring adults in a child's life, like parents, teachers, or coaches.

**Coping:** Ways to handle and lower stress.

**Grounding:** Simple activities that calm worries and focus on the "here and now."

**Validating:** Letting someone know that their feelings are okay. You might say, "I see you feel sad right now, and that is normal."

# Introduction



When someone close to you dies, it can feel confusing and overwhelming. Because you are hurting, it might feel extra hard to help the children or teens in your life. This booklet is here to help. We will explain how to talk about the loss, what kind of feelings to expect, and activities that help kids of different ages cope.

Please use this guide in whatever way works best for your family. You can read some parts now and save others for later. This booklet doesn't cover everything, but there are many other resources available to help provide support. Feel free to share this guide with other important adults in your child's life, such as teachers, coaches, or other family members.

## The First Few Days: Sharing the News

Talking to children about death can be difficult. It is best to be open, honest, and as clear as you can. Before you start the conversation, keep these tips in mind:

- **Ask for help:** Try to have another adult with you when you share the news. You can support each other.
- **Think about their age:** Younger children usually need fewer details, while older children and teens may want to know more.
- **Talk separately if needed:** If your children have large age gaps or handle things differently, it might be better to talk to them one-on-one.
- **Pick the right time:** Have the talk during the day so they can do something calm or fun afterward. Do not have this conversation right before bedtime.
- **Supplies to have nearby:** Water, tissues, and small toys or “fidgets” to help kids stay calm and relieve stress.

## How Kids Understand Death

Children of all ages feel the pain of being apart from someone they love. However, their understanding changes as they grow:

- **Kids under 5:** Usually don't understand that death is permanent (forever).
- **Kids ages 6 to 8:** Start to understand the difference between living and dying. This gets clearer as they get older.

## How to Explain Death

- **Start the talk:** Say, "I have something important I want to talk to you about."
- **Ask first:** Ask what they already know or think is happening. This helps you know where to start.
- **Be clear:** Say something like, "[\_\_\_\_\_] has been very sick. The doctors say there is no more medicine that can help their body work. When a body stops working, it dies."
- **Use real words:** Use words like **"death"** and **"dying."** Avoid saying things like "they went to sleep" or "we lost them." These phrases can confuse children and make them afraid of sleep or getting lost.
- **Explain what happens:** "When a body stops working, the heart stops beating and the lungs stop breathing. The person can't see, smell, eat, or think anymore."
- **Faith and beliefs:** If you want to share your religious or spiritual beliefs about death with your child, asking your faith leader or spiritual advisor for support may be helpful.

### What if...

*...your child gets very upset?*

Stop the talk and focus on comforting them. You can finish the conversation later. It is okay to talk in small steps rather than all at once.



## It's Okay Not to Have All the Answers

You don't have to know everything. If a child asks a question and you aren't sure, it is perfectly okay to say: **"I don't know the answer to that right now, but if I find out later, I will let you know."**

### Different Kinds of Loss

The way you talk about death can change depending on how it happened.

## When Someone Has Been Sick for a Long Time

If a loved one was sick for a while, you might have already been grieving small losses along the way.

- **A chance to talk:** You may have had time to talk about their health getting worse, so the death might not be a total shock to the child.
- **Feeling relieved:** Sometimes, kids might feel a little bit of relief. For example, they might be happy they can go back to their normal activities or that the person isn't in pain anymore. **Tell them this is normal.** It doesn't mean they aren't sad, and they shouldn't feel guilty about it.

## When a Death Happens Suddenly

A sudden loss can be very scary for children. They might start to worry: *Will someone else die? Will I die?*

- **Validate their fears:** It's okay to admit that not knowing what will happen is uncomfortable.
- **Offer comfort:** Remind them that they will always be cared for. You can say something like: "We do our best to stay healthy and take care of ourselves. Even though we don't know what tomorrow will bring, I expect us to be together for a long time."

# Understanding Grief at Different Ages

The following guide shows how children usually understand death based on their age. It also includes common reactions you might see and tips on what you can say or do to help them cope.

## How to use this section:

- What they understand: How kids at this age think about death.
- What you might see: Common ways they might act or feel.
- How you can help: Simple things you can do to support them.

## Understanding Grief in Young Children

Age Group	What They Understand	How They Might Act	How to Help Them
<b>Infants &amp; Toddlers</b> (0–2 years)	They don't understand death, but they can feel when adults are sad or stressed.	They may cry more, act fussy, or want to be held all the time. They might eat or sleep differently.	Give them lots of hugs and cuddles. Keep their daily schedule (naps and meals) the same so they feel safe.
<b>Preschoolers</b> (3–5 years)	They might think death isn't forever. They may think their own "bad" thoughts caused it. They get confused by words like "passed away" or "lost."	They might act like a younger baby (wetting the bed or using baby talk). They may ask the same questions over and over or worry about being left alone.	Be honest and use simple words like "died." Let them play with toys to express their feelings. Make a "cozy corner" with pillows and photos of their loved one.

## Quick Tips for Success:

- **Be clear:** Avoid saying “they went to sleep.” This can make kids afraid of bedtime.
- **Give choices:** Let them pick out their own snacks or games to help them feel more in control.
- **Stick to routines:** Knowing what happens next in their day helps them feel secure.

## Understanding Grief in Older Kids and Teens

Age Group	What They Understand	How They Might Act	How to Help Them
<b>School-Age</b> (6–12 years)	They know death is forever. They might worry they caused it by something they said or did. They often ask a lot of "how" and "why" questions.	They may feel sad, angry, or guilty. Some get headaches or stomachaches. They might have trouble with schoolwork or play like nothing happened to take a break from the sadness.	Listen closely when they talk. Remind them that all feelings are okay. Encourage them to draw, write in a journal, or play outside to let their feelings out.
<b>Teens</b> (12+ years)	They understand death clearly. They may worry about the future or wonder why bad things happen. They often find it easier to talk to friends than to family.	They might change their eating or sleeping habits. Some may take risks or try to act like an adult by taking on too many chores or responsibilities.	Listen without trying to "fix" everything. Let them make choices when possible. If they seem like they might hurt themselves, get professional help right away.

## Important Ideas for Both Groups:

- **Be creative:** Let them use music, art, or sports to show how they feel.
- **Include them:** Ask if they want to go to the funeral or memorial service. Being part of it can help them say goodbye.
- **Comfort space:** Just like younger kids, older kids benefit from a “cozy spot” with blankets and photos of their loved one.



## Ways to Help Children of All Ages

Change is hard for everyone. It is important to tell your child or teen that your family will get through this together. Remind them that they will always be loved and protected.

Here are some ways to support your child:

- **Share your feelings:** When you talk about your own feelings, it shows your child that it is okay to be sad. It is fine to let your child see you cry, and it is okay to cry together.
- **Watch and listen:** Pay attention to your child’s drawings, how they play, and the questions they ask. They might worry about who will take care of them or if they will die too. Be honest and remind them that while all living things die, it usually happens after a long life.
- **Give comfort:** You can’t make the sadness go away, but being there for them helps them feel safe.
- **Tell the truth:** Be honest when you answer their questions. If you don’t know an answer, just say so. This helps maintain trust.
- **Stick to a schedule:** Keeping your normal daily routine helps kids feel safe when things feel messy. If you have to change a routine, let your child help. For example, if the person who died used to tuck them in, ask your child who they would like to do it now.
- **Be together:** Every child handles grief differently. Spending time together helps your child feel safe and keeps your bond strong.
- **Play and move:** Play, art, and exercise are very important. They help children express their feelings and questions in a natural way.

## Preparing Your Child for What to Expect

Children notice when things change at home. This can be confusing, especially for younger kids who feel safest when things stay the same. You can help them stay calm by explaining what will happen over the next few days.

- **Explain visitors:** Tell your child if there will be extra people coming to the house. Explain that some people might be crying, very quiet, or acting sad.
- **Talk about the plan:** Explain what will happen at the funeral, memorial, or burial. If your child chooses not to go, tell them exactly who will be staying with them while you are away.
- **Include them:** Let your child feel like they are part of what is happening. Give them choices on how they want to participate.
- **Plan for school:** Talk with your child about when they feel ready to go back to school. You should also talk to their teachers to make a plan.
- **Listen to their needs:** Make sure your child's questions and worries are heard from the very start. Kids might ask the same questions many times. It can be helpful to have a set time every day just for talking and answering their questions.

## Attending Funerals

Going to a funeral or memorial service gives children and teens a chance to mourn with others and say goodbye.

- **The choice:** A child should be invited to go but not forced.
- **Explain the details:** To help them decide, explain the *who, what, where, when, and why* of the service.
- **Have an exit plan:** Make sure there is a trusted adult who can leave the service with the child if they need a break or want to go home early.
- **Saying goodbye from afar:** If a child is nervous or chooses not to go, they can still honor their loved one. They could draw a picture, write a letter, make a photo collage, or create a music playlist of their loved one's favorite songs.

# Looking Forward

As time passes, you will find new ways to handle your feelings.

- **Be kind to yourself:** Don't judge your feelings or compare your sadness to anyone else's. Instead, look back at how far you have come since the first day.
- **It's okay to feel happy:** You might have moments where you briefly forget your sadness. You might feel guilty about this, but these "grief breaks" are a normal part of healing.
- **Keep the memory alive:** Give yourself and your children permission to feel happy again. You will never forget your loved one; their memory will always live on in many ways.



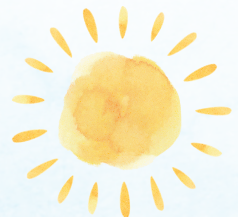
## Sharing Your Feelings

- **Feelings mailbox:** Make a special box or jar. Kids can write down or draw their questions and feelings on slips of paper and "mail" them into the jar.
- **Journaling:** Writing in a notebook can help. If they aren't sure how to start, use a "prompt" like: *"If I could change one thing, it would be..."* or *"Since the death, school has felt like..."*
- **Family scrapbook:** Work together to make a book filled with favorite photos and memories of your loved one.

## Grounding (Staying Calm in the Moment)

When feelings get too big or scary, these activities can bring the focus back to the present.

- **Slow breathing:** Use bubbles or a pinwheel to practice taking ten slow, deep breaths. This is great for younger kids.
- **The 5-4-3-2-1 game:** Use your senses to notice:
  - 5 things you can see.
  - 4 things you can hear.
  - 3 things you can touch.
  - 2 things you can smell.
  - 1 thing you can taste.



## Movement Activities

When feelings are very strong, movement can help release stress and energy.

- **Dance:** Put on music and move around.
- **Release energy:** Try stomping on the ground or popping bubble wrap.
- **Safe ways to let out frustration:** Rip up old newspaper or throw soft, wet things—like sponges or water balloons—at an outside wall.
- **Stay calm:** Try gentle stretching or simple yoga poses.

## Ways to Remember

Finding ways to keep memories close can bring comfort.

- **Carry a memento:** Keep a small item that reminds you of them, like a smooth stone or a special coin, in your pocket.
- **Plant something:** Plant a tree or flowers in their honor.
- **Create a memorial space:** Set aside a small area in your home for photos, drawings, and items that belonged to them.
- **Make a memory box:** Use a shoebox or container to store special letters, photos, and keepsakes that make you smile.

## Signs of healing and signs of need

Children are resilient and usually return to normal after a death with time and support. However, if you see long-lasting changes that stop a child from doing their daily activities, they may need help from a child and adolescent mental health professional.

### Signs a Child Needs Extra Support:

- Loses interest in friends and favorite activities.
- Struggles to sleep, eats less, or is afraid to be alone.
- Acts much younger than their age (regression).
- Schoolwork drops or they refuse to go to school.
- Constantly playing games about the person who died.
- Repeatedly saying they want to be with the person who died.



### How to Check In:

- “You seem really \_\_\_\_\_ lately. Tell me what you are thinking about.”
- “How do you feel when \_\_\_\_\_?”

## Getting Ready for Special Days

After someone you love dies, holidays and big dates might feel different. It is a good idea to talk with your child about this. This helps them prepare for feelings that may come up.

You can make a plan for significant days, like the person’s birthday or the date of their death. You might want to do something small, like lighting a candle, or something bigger, like a family party. You could also just sit together and share stories. Other ideas include cooking their favorite meal or looking through old photos to remember the special times.



Taking care of yourself is necessary. By finding support, you can better manage your feelings and help your child through grief. Research shows children do better when adults around them are coping well. Actively using support tools helps you be present and models healthy behavior for your child.

### **Steps to Take Care of Yourself:**

- **Create a plan:** Make a “toolbox” of things that make you feel calm or happy.
- **Seek support:** Reach out to trusted friends, family, or professionals.
- **Use resources:** Consider therapy, support groups, or camps.
- **Find comfort:** Look for daily inspiration and stay open with your emotions.

### **Where to Find Help:**

- **UC Davis Child Life webpage:** Additional resources and camps.
- **Trusted friends and family:** People who know your family well.
- **Medical professionals or spiritual leaders.**

Your self-care plan can change as you grow and heal, acting as a guide through the grief process.



# BOOKS



## All ages

- *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, by Bryan Mellonie
- *The Next Place*, by Warren Hanson
- *The Invisible String*, by Patrice Karst
- *Wherever You Are My Love Will Find You*, by Nancy Tillman
- *The Memory Box: A Book about Grief*, by Joanna Rowland
- *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*, by The Dougy Center

## Younger children (3 - 6 years):

- *I Miss You: A First Look at Death*, by Pat Thomas
- *The Goodbye Book*, by Todd Parr
- *We Were Gonna Have a Baby, But We Had an Angel Instead*, by Pat Schwiebert (for newborn loss)

## School-age (7 - 12 years)

- *Help Me Say Goodbye (workbook)*, by Janis Silverman
- *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies*, by Trevor Romain

## Teenagers (12+ years)

- *Helping Teens Cope with Death*, by The Dougy Center
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas*, by Alan D. Wolfelt



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For more information, please visit: [ucdavis.health/childlife](https://ucdavis.health/childlife)

The Child Life and Creative Arts Therapy Department supports coping through prioritizing psychosocial needs of patients and families. We encourage and protect unconditional emotional safety, especially in times of hardship.



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