



A Guide for Adults

Supporting a child or teen before and after the loss of a loved one

Introduction

This booklet has been prepared to assist you with the important task of helping a child or teen understand what is taking place when a family member has a serious illness and is dying, as well as after the death has occurred. This information will give you some guidance about how to speak with your children, how to answer questions they may have, how they might view what is happening and ways to support them in their grief. Please remember to be truthful, open and factual with children, no matter how young.

If you need further support or have questions, please contact your social worker or our Healing Hearts program at 1-844-LIGHTEN.

Supporting your children when someone is seriously ill

Basic information about the illness should be shared with your children, using simple factual terms they can understand. Educational pamphlets about many illnesses are available from national organizations. Haven Hospice has a variety of resources, and our social workers can help you obtain the necessary materials for your specific situation.

Use correct medical terms when speaking to children. Don't over explain, but be truthful and factual. Fears and fantasies are often worse than reality and can be diminished with the truth. If the ill person has changed in physical appearance, such as noticeable weight loss, explain why this has happened prior to visiting the patient. Children cope best by understanding. Providing the truth and answers to their questions will prepare them for the changes occurring in their lives and in the family.

Describe to the children what they might see when the ill person is in a hospital or nursing home. Offer the choice of a phone call, letter, or drawing if they seem reluctant or do not want to visit. Reassure your children that nothing they did, or did not do, caused the illness or accident. Some children may feel guilty for events that have nothing to do with the illness or accident.

Listen and encourage communication and questions. Children are very sensitive to the emotions of adults and will respond to your emotional state more so than to the knowledge that the person is very ill. Do not assume that a lack of questions means a lack of interest.

Children are more likely to express themselves through art, play or other activity rather than words. Children may also use play to escape for a while, then ask some questions and go back to playing.

Share your feelings to help your children understand their feelings. "I am very sad that Grandpa is so sick." By sharing, you can reassure your children that having certain feelings is natural and acceptable. Children model coping skills and behaviors of the primary adults in their lives.

Get help by encouraging other family members, friends, and neighbors to provide support and structure for your children when you have to provide care for your loved one. This is a time when family and community are very important. Communicate with your children's teachers and others about the changes in their lives. They may be able to provide extra support and personal time.

Try to maintain a normal day-to-day routine. Children need structure to feel secure during stressful times. They also need to be involved in appropriate ways in order to not feel left out when the focus of the family is on the ill person's needs. For example, "Would you like to bring Grandma some water?" Do not let a child assume the caretaker role. Some children will try to take care of the patient or the caregiver. Reassure them that there are tasks that they can do to help, and they are not expected to assume adult responsibilities. For example, don't tell a child he has to be the "man of the house now."

Activities your children can do when someone is ill

These activities help them feel a part of the family when someone is seriously ill. Children respond to being needed, just as adults do. They can:

- Sit with the sick person, hold their hand or keep them company.
- Tell the sick person about their day and talk about activities they did that were fun.
- Talk about school projects or share how they are using a skill their loved one taught them.
- Assist you in running errands, bringing the person water, flowers or a favorite meal.

- Do a special task, like mow the lawn or walk the dog. Make drawings, cards, poems or select a song to share with the person who is sick.
- Help with household tasks since a lot of time may be needed for care of the loved one.
- Talk to someone about their thoughts and feelings.
- Ask questions about what is happening and what will happen as time goes on.

How to talk with young children when someone has died

Adults commonly make statements that confuse children rather than help them understand. Children are very literal and practical; therefore, they can cope better when told the simple facts.

The following statements are best avoided when talking to a child about the death of a loved one.

“Grandpa has gone,” or “we’ve lost him.”

When people go away, they come back. When we lose a toy, it can often be found. When someone dies, they do not come back and cannot be found.

“Grandpa has gone to sleep forever.”

Your child may become afraid to go to sleep, believing that he or she may never wake up.

“Grandpa is watching over you from heaven.”

Your child may develop a fear of making mistakes or feel like he or she is being spied on.

“Your brother was so good that God chose him to come live in heaven.”

Your child may wonder about the value of being good if it means going away.

Therefore, it is best to simply tell your child, “Grandpa’s heart became very weak. Then his heart stopped and he died.” You might like to add other thoughts and beliefs. “We will remember Grandpa; the love Grandpa had for us and the love we had for him is still alive in our heart.” This is a time when our spiritual belief systems should be shared with our children. For example: “After someone dies and can’t be with us any more like they used to be, then God (or Jesus) invites them into His home which is in Heaven.”

Reassure your children that you are going to be there to care for them. Help your children understand that they did not cause the death. You might say: “There is nothing you said or did that made Grandma sick or caused her to die. Most people live until they are very old.” Reassure your child that memories of the person who died will be maintained through pictures and other activities. Encourage your child to ask questions. Children often ask very practical questions such as: “How deep is the grave?” or “Why is she so pale?” These questions are common and reflect the child’s natural curiosity. These questions are best answered openly and honestly using words that the child can understand.



Young children and funerals

The question of whether or not young children should attend a funeral or even go to the funeral home is often a concern of parents. The first consideration should be, "What does my child want to do?"

If your children express an interest in attending the funeral and are old enough to sit through a church service, it is best to permit them to attend. If they are hesitant, encourage attendance, but never force. Designate an adult to be with children should any of them change their minds and want to leave.

Explain that the funeral is a time, (at a church, funeral home or graveside) when friends and family gather to share their sadness, memories and love for the person who has died. People will be sad and may cry. Tears are a natural way for people to express their sadness. Crying is ok. Prepare them for what they can expect at the service. Music, talking about the person and prayers are all part of memorial and funeral services. Your children may want to share in

the services by reading a poem, writing a letter or selecting a hymn to be sung. Encouraging children to be part of the planning will assist them in actively beginning their mourning. Children feel secure in the family unit, and seeing that others also mourn will help validate their own feelings.

If you decide not to allow children to attend, they may wonder what is so awful that they could not be present. Remember, children's fears are often much worse than reality. They may also struggle with a lack of closure or formal chance to say goodbye if they wanted to attend and were not allowed.

Remember that the funeral provides a structured way of allowing and encouraging both adults and children to comfort each other, openly mourn and honor the life of the person who has died.

Understanding grief at different developmental stages

Age, development level of the child, life experiences, cultural factors and communication by family adults will influence a child's understanding of death. At the same time, children (even the very young) have a certain wisdom and resilience that we can acknowledge and support by being open and truthful with them even about death and dying. Children and teens grieve differently than adults. With children, grief work is gradual and cyclical. They don't need to talk about the person or express their grief all of the time. They weave in and out of grief and need to talk about other things, such as the day-to-day happenings at school and home. Questions may arise over time. For example, a child may ask for more details about the death a year or more later. Children and teens do not want to be seen as different from their peers or stared at and pointed out as the child whose ...(Mother/Sister/Friend) died. Younger children often work out their grief through their play and through expressing their feelings in drawings. They will revisit their grief many times through the years.

Under 3 Years Old

Very young children do grieve and respond to the changes around them. Although they cannot understand the concept of death, they react to the loss. An infant may cry more than usual, sleep more or less than usual, and change eating and elimination patterns. Toddlers may become agitated and regress to previous levels of development and behaviors that brought emotional comfort, such as thumb sucking or becoming less adventurous. They may exhibit temper tantrums, restlessness, sadness and clinging. They also sense the sadness, anxiety and other feelings in their caregivers. Infants and toddlers respond best to love, comfort and consistent care. Holding, rocking and cuddling for large amounts of time are helpful, as well as consistent routines and having a primary caregiver.

Ages 3 to 5

Children this age usually do not understand that death is irreversible, because they have few life experiences to help them understand what has happened and how the death will affect their lives. These children tend to see death as similar to sleep or a journey from which one can awaken or return. Death is seen as temporary as in cartoons or TV shows. Despite explaining death to children in this age range, it is common for them to repeatedly ask when the deceased person is coming back. Young children may worry about the person being hungry or how he/she will breathe in the grave, for example. It is important to explain that the body has stopped working and doesn't need to eat or breathe, and doesn't feel any pain. Answer your children's questions simply and factually with a calm and caring voice. Reassure them that nothing they thought, said or did caused the death and that you will be there to love them and care for them. Young children need extra physical touch. They react to the emotions in their caregivers. Keeping routines as normal as possible is important for them.

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Ages 6 to 9

Children in this age range have begun to understand that death is final, but often think it only happens to other people – not them or their families. Death is scary – like a monster that steals people in the night. They are curious about the details of death. There is still a tendency toward magical thinking. Asking a child “Why do you think ... (Mother/Grandpa/Sister) died?” may reveal these thoughts if that is the case. They may worry about other members of the family dying and who will take care of them if that happens. There may be some temporary regression to earlier developmental behaviors (e.g. baby talk or clinginess) and/or increased physical activity and aggression. A child may think that if he hurts another person, it will take some of his pain away. Sometimes a child will act as if nothing at all has happened. It is important to give clear factual information that children can understand. Help them make a list of the people they can talk to if worried, sad or angry. A child this age or under may say things like “I want to die so that I can be with Mom in Heaven.” This statement is not a death wish or reason for alarm. The child is simply expressing her love and natural desire to be with her loved one. You might reply by saying, “Yes, I know you miss your mom. I miss her, too. However, she can’t be with us now like she was before she died. But we can still talk to her, love her and remember her in our hearts.”

Ages 9 to 12

Children this age understand that death is final and comes to all living things. They may make jokes about death or put on an unaffected façade to hide the fear they feel. This age tends to be less feeling-focused and instead become more argumentative and combative. Sleep disturbances are common, as well as concerns about isolation and being separated from their family. There may be some regressive behavior, such as clinginess. Generally, children this age are fascinated by the specific details of the death and what happens to the body afterward. Conformity to peers begins to become more important.



Common feelings of grieving children

Fear: The child may wonder what happened? Who will die next? How will we live without the deceased? Will my other parent die? Who will take care of me? Why did it happen to me? Will I die?

Guilt: The child may believe that their real or imagined action caused the death (“Mom died after our fight. It’s my fault.”). Or, they may believe their lack of action could have prevented the death (“I should have stopped her from leaving.”).

Anger: The child may experience feelings of anger as a protest against death (“Why did God take my Dad away from me?”) or as a way to cover up the feelings of anxiety and vulnerability they might be feeling.

Sorrow: The child may be struggling to accept the loss or grieving the loss of security.

Acceptance: The child is learning to live with loss and going on with life.

Teens

The teen years are difficult at best, and grieving intensifies teens’ experiences. Death is both fascinating and frightening. Teenagers are attempting to separate from their parents and find their own identities. Losses may make them feel more child-like and dependent, which is distressing for them. Above all else, they do not want to appear different from their peers. Below are some common characteristics of grieving teens. They may:

- Feel guilty for the way they may have acted, things said or not said or may feel responsible for the death and think they could have prevented it.
- Fear that others will treat them differently.
- Fear rejection by their peers.
- Feel anger at the person for dying, at doctors, at God, and/or family members who grieve differently, at friends who don’t understand,

or at themselves for not feeling better quickly enough.

- Feel devastated by good-byes, whether missed or reliving them over and over.
- Trying to be strong for family while denying their own emotions. Experience sleeping problems including nightmares.
- Engage in risky behavior or play with death.
- Have increased risk of self-mutilation, suicide, eating disorders and substance abuse.
- Feel depression or an inability to concentrate.
- Criticize or idolize the deceased.
- Become uncommunicative or overly dramatic.
- Start having academic problems.
- Start having conflicts with adults.
- Face grief alone if friends don’t understand or if their family is not supportive.
- Anticipate future losses such as how the deceased won’t be there for graduation, holidays, etc.
- Experience isolation. Younger teens may withdraw and become preoccupied with and attached to the deceased.
- Experience escapism. Older teens may deny or avoid loss by leaving home and staying busy, which delays grief.
- Question life’s meaning.
- Turn to friends for support instead of family.
- Need suggestions of things to do when they are angry, or need to be taught “thought-stopping” methods if they become preoccupied with images of the dead. They need to know they are not alone and that they are not going crazy.

It is important to remember that every child or teen is unique and will grieve in a unique way. keep the lines of communication open.



Ways to be supportive to a grieving child or teen

- Give them honest, direct and factual information that is understandable for their developmental level. Use words like “dead.”
- Answer their questions, even the difficult ones. Never lie to children or teens.
- Listen to them. It helps them to tell their story. Expect, allow, listen to and accept all of their feelings.
- Give them extra time and hugs – with their permission.
- Model grief for them. If a child never sees adults grieve, she or he may assume no one cared about the deceased.
- Answer questions over and over. It takes time for children to understand and learn to live with a death.
- As a child grows older, expect different questions to be asked as they develop and integrate the loss.
- Talk when they want to. Children weave in and out of grief. They don’t want to think or talk about it all the time (they prefer small doses).
- Talk about and remember the person who died, especially during special dates/times of the year.
- Encourage safe, physical expression, such as sports, active play and safe release of anger, e.g. hit a mattress with a tennis racket, tear newspapers or magazines into shreds and throw them away, smash ice cubes with a hammer, punch a pillow, pound nails with a hammer, yell in the shower, describe your anger on paper and then wad it up and throw it away, throw a basketball at a hoop and do chores that require a lot of energy, like raking or mowing.
- Give choices whenever possible.
- Provide crayons, markers, pens, clay and paint. Children express feelings through their artistic creations.
- Reflect back to the child what they are doing in language and play, rather than asking questions, giving interpretations or advice.
- Reassure the child or teen of the facts that show they could not have prevented the death.
- Keep routines as much as possible.
- Expect some children to regress temporarily to earlier levels of development.
- Give children permission not to be an adult. “No, you are not the man in the family now.”
- Encourage older children and teens to write about their grief.
- Respect teens’ privacy without abandoning them.
- They may turn to their friends rather than family for support.
- Encourage teens to talk about the meaning of the death for them.
- Allow a teen to see your humorous side, in addition to the serious.
- Always respond in a non-judgmental manner.
- Support re-entry to school with statements such as, “When you are ready to go back, how can I help you?”
- Does the child/teen want to be left alone? Want attention? Not want to be stared at or looked at as different?
- Remember special days that impact the child or teen (birthdays, holidays, etc.)

Activities that promote healthy grieving in children

- Family prayer, quiet reflection or meditation.
- Set up a home memorial with votive candle and picture of the deceased.
- Plant a tree, shrub or flowerbed, or set up a bird feeder or bird bath in honor of your loved one.
- Remember your loved one and share happy memories through storytelling and conversation, perhaps using a photo album or video.
- Honor your loved one by setting a place at the dining table or having a birthday cake for her/him.
- Make a memory album of pictures, drawings, verses, poems or notes written by the youth and adults.
- Make a memory box, big or small, with pictures, souvenirs and objects that belonged to the person who died.
- Write a letter of appreciation or draw a picture for the person who died, and then read letters out loud or describe the drawing.
- Read age-appropriate books and stories that speak about life cycles, life and death.

- Enjoy playful activities for the whole family to participate in, either indoors or outdoors, in honor of the person who died.
- Make a collage about the person who died or the relationship with the person.
- Encourage child/teen to create a ritual that is meaningful for her/him.
- Identify those people who are living and who care for them.
- Keep a grief journal.



Grief-related books for children and teens

This list is only a small sample of the books available for grieving children. Some are available through your local library.

Two excellent resources for grief related books are Compassion Books (www.compassionbooks.com) and the Centering Corporation (www.centering.org).

Death of a Parent

- ***When a Parent is Very Sick*** by Eda LeShan (ages 8-12): Practical, realistic insights to help a family when a parent is seriously ill.
- ***Sunflowers & Rainbows for Tia - Saying Goodbye to Daddy*** by Alesia Alexander-Greene (ages 5-12): An African-American family gathers together to grieve the death of Tia's father.
- ***Everett Anderson's Goodbye*** by Lucille Clifton (ages 5-8): Everett promises to be good if Daddy could come back alive.
- ***My Daddy Died and It's All God's Fault*** by Sue Holden (ages 3-12): Nine-year-old boy's father dies.

- ***Tim's Dad*** by Ruth Hitchcock (ages 8-12): Story about a boy whose father died.
- ***When My Daddy Died*** by Janice Hammond (ages 3-10): A child's view of death when Dad dies.
- ***When My Mommy Died*** by Janice Hammond (ages 3-10): A child's view of death when mom dies.
- ***The Brightest Star!*** by Kathleen Maresh Hemery (ages 6-12): A little girl, grieving the death of her mother, finds comfort in looking for the brightest star in the sky to remind her of the mother's love.

Death of a Grandparent

- ***The Memory Box*** by Kirsten McLaughlin (ages 4-10): A young child shares his feelings after Grandpa dies.
- ***Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*** by Tomie dePaola (ages 3-7): Young child's great-grandmother has died.
- ***Blackberries in the Dark*** by Mavis Jukes (ages 8-12): Grandpa has died and the farm is not the same for Austin when he visits.

- **My Grandson Lew** by Charlotte Zolotow (ages 4 - 8): Lewis and his mother remember Grandpa.
- **Annie and the Old One** by Miska Miles (ages 8-12): Facing grandmother's approaching death in a background of Navajo culture and traditions.
- **The Two of Them** by Aliko (ages 3-12): Describes the relationship between a grandfather and granddaughter from her birth until his death.

Loss of a Sibling

- **Where's Jess?** by Joy and Marvin Johnson (ages 3-7): Very young sibling loss.
- **A Little Bit of Rob** by Barbara Turner (ages 6-12): A sister finds comfort wearing her brother's shirt after his death.
- **Lost and Found** by Ellen Yeomans (ages 6-12): Remembering a sister.
- **Children Facing Grief** by Janis Loomis Romond (ages 6-12): Letters from bereaved brothers and sisters.
- **Am I Still a Sister?** by Alicia Sims (ages 6 and up): A child's discoveries made after baby brother died.
- **What About Me?** by Allan Peterkin (ages 3-7): When brothers and sisters get sick.

Loss of a Friend

- **Timothy Duck** by Lynn Blackburn (ages 3-7): A picture book for young children about the death of a friend.
- **A Taste of Blackberries** by Doris B. Smith (ages 8-12): A young child copes with the sudden death of his friend.
- **Bridge to Terabithia** by Katherine Paterson (ages 8-12): A friend dies and leaves a legacy, enabling others to cope with her untimely death.

General Loss

- **When Dinosaurs Die** by Laurie Krasny-Brown and Marc Brown (ages 5 - 12): A guide to understanding death.
- **Tear Soup - A Recipe for Healing After Loss** by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen (ages 10 - adult).
- **Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids - 100 Practical Ideas** by Alan Wolfelt (ages 5 - 12).
- **Healing a Child's Grieving Heart - 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers** by Alan Wolfelt. (for adults)
- **The Great Change** by White Deer of Autumn (ages 5-12): A Native American grandmother

explains the meaning of death.

- **A Child's Book about Burial and Cremation** by Earl Grollman and Joy Johnson (ages 5-10): How a body is cared for and why it is important to say goodbye.
- **The Saddest Time** by Norma Simon (ages 7-12): Three stories about death in a family and of a friend.
- **Lifetimes** by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (ages 5-10): A beautiful way to explain death to children using the life cycles of all living things.
- **Badger's Parting Gifts** by Susan Varley (ages 3-12): Badger is so old that he knows he will soon die and worries about his friends' sadness.
- **Tell Me, Papa** by Joy and Marvin Johnson (ages 3-12): A family book about death and funerals.
- **I Miss You** by Pat Thomas (ages 5-8): First look at death.
- **The Fall of Freddie the Leaf** by Leo Buscaglia (all ages): Freddie and his companion leaves change with the passing seasons, finally falling to the ground with winter's snow.
- **On the Wings of a Butterfly** by Marilyn Maple (ages 8-12): A story about life and death.
- **When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness - Children Can Learn to Cope with Loss and Change** by Marge Heegaard (ages 9 and up): Workbook in which child can write and draw.
- **The Next Place** by Warren Hanson (all ages): Gentle verse revealing a safe and welcome destination free from earthly hurts and filled with wonder and peace.
- **Common Threads of Teenage Grief - a Handbook for Healing** by Teens Who Know and Janet Tyson.
- **Facing Change - Falling Apart and Coming Together Again in the Teen Years** by Donna O'Toole.
- **When Death Walks In - for Teenagers Facing Grief** by Mark Scrivani.
- **Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens - 100 Practical Ideas** by Alan Wolfelt.

Pet Loss

- **The Accident** by Carol Carrick (ages 8-12): Christopher's dog is hit by a truck and killed.
- **Remembering Rafferty** by Joy Johnson (ages 5-10): Story of a dog who is ill and the family decides to end his life.
- **The Tenth Good Thing About Barney** by Judith Viorst (ages 3-7): Young child's pet cat dies and he discovers ten good things about Barney.



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