CHILDREN’S GRIEF RESOURCE PACKET

This resource has been assembled to assist parents/adults to help their children understand and appropriately deal with their grief.

What do children need when there is a serious illness in the family?

Children need...

Accurate information about the illness, presented in concrete language that the child can understand

An understanding of the cause of the disease (if known), and how the disease is spread – or not spread

Assurance that nothing they did, said, or wished caused the disease, or can make it better or worse

An understanding of the patient’s prognosis

Permission to ask questions and express feelings

Permission to continue to be a child

Validation of their feelings

Because children often do not have the words to express their feelings, they may act them out in ways that can be distressing to adults. When this occurs it is important that adults...

• Look for the disguised need and feelings behind the action.

• Set limits, while also recognizing the emotional turmoil behind the acting out behaviors.

• Offer the child alternative vehicles to express and release their angry feelings (e.g. throwing a ball, running, screaming into a pillow or scribbling with crayons).
Talking to Children about Death

"By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know - if they have misconceptions, fears, or worries. We can help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talk does not solve all problems but without talk we are even more limited in our ability to help."

Talking to Children about Death DHEW Pub. No (ADM) 79-838

RATIONALE

Talking openly to your child about death can create a comfortable environment to ask questions. If children are sheltered from learning about death they are subject to fears and traumas that grow out of well intended attempts to help. Children are looking to you for guidance through this difficult time. Each child is unique, thus ways of explaining death will vary. The journey of healing grief will weave itself throughout a child’s developmental years.

EXPLAINING DEATH AND WHAT IT MEANS

- Avoid euphemism for death like “lost”, “taken away”, “passed away”, or “gone on a long journey”. These euphemisms feed children’s fears of being abandoned and they create anxiety and confusion. For instance, in an effort to “soften” death one might say to a child that the loved one has gone to sleep thus making the child afraid to go to bed at night. Children often attach unintended meanings to non-concrete language.

- Avoid overwhelming the child with information. Give the facts of the death and then allow for questions.

- Explain that the body will not do what it use to like walk, talk, move, see or hear.

- Explain that the person can no longer feel any feelings he or she used to feel – such as sad, mad, happy, hurt, hot or cold.

- Explain that the person no longer eats, drinks or goes to the bathroom.
Way to Help Children Cope with Death

- Be direct, simple and honest. Explain truthfully what happened.
- Encourage the child to express how they feel and that crying is a normal response and helpful, especially if they are not tearful and wonder why others are crying. It’s also okay if they don’t cry.
- Accept the emotions and reactions the child expresses. Don’t tell the child how he should or should not feel.
- Offer warmth and your physical presence and affection.
- Share your own feelings with the child. Allow the child to comfort you.
- Be patient. Know that children need to hear “The Story” and may ask the same questions again and again.
- Reassure the child that death is not contagious and that the death of one person does not mean the child or another loved one will soon die.
- Maintain order, stability and security in the child’s life.
- Listen to what the child is telling or asking you and respond accordingly to their needs.
- Allow the child to make some decisions about participation in family rituals (i.e. visitation, the funeral, socializing after the funeral). Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.
- Inform the school regarding a loved one’s illness or death as there may be a change in the child’s performance. Request a school support person/counselor be available to assist as needed.
- Allow the use of a comfort object like a blanket, stuffed animal, favorite music, photos or mementos.
- During the visitation/funeral plan to have a close friend available to assist with needs your child may have.

Remember that children differ greatly in how they understand death, as well as their response to grief. Their understanding is influenced by their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality, characteristics, religious and cultural beliefs, and what is modeled for them by those closest to them.

You can make a difference!
### How to Help a Child Following a Death

#### Age Concepts and Beliefs

<table>
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<th>AGE</th>
<th>CONCEPTS &amp; BELIEFS</th>
<th>DIFFICULT EMOTIONS</th>
<th>POSSIBLE BEHAVIORS</th>
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| 0 - 2 years | No understanding of death  
Child does not have words for feelings  
Aware of the absence of loved one  
Notices changes in routine  
Notices changes in family emotions | Longing  
Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one  
Fears of being abandoned  
Anxiety | Crying  
Sickness  
Indigestion  
Thrasing  
Rocking  
Throwing  
Sucking, biting  
Sleeplessness | Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance  
Maintain routines  
Meet immediate physical needs  
Include the child in the mourning process when possible  
Be gentle & patient |
| 3 - 5 years | No understanding of permanence of death  
To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip  
May wonder what deceased is doing  
Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible  
May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies  
Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities | Fear  
Sadness  
Insecurity  
Confusion  
Anger  
Irritable  
Agitated  
Worried  
Guilt  
Fear | Regressive behaviors  
Repetitive questions  
Withdrawn  
Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings  
Interested in dead things  
Acts as if death never happened  
Intense dreams  
Physical complaints  
Crying  
Fighting | Allow the child to regress  
Encourage children to play & have fun  
Let the child cry  
Talk (reflective listening)  
Include child in family rituals & mourning |
| 6 - 9 years | Understands that death is final  
Interested in the biology of death  
Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay  
His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death  
Death is punishment  
Forming spiritual concepts  
Who will care for me if my caregiver dies  
Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)  | Sad  
Anger  
Lonely  
Withdrawn  
Worried  
Anxious  
Irritable  
Confusion  
Guilt  
Fear | Regressive behaviors  
Specific questioning – looking for details  
Acts as if the death never happened  
Hides feelings  
Withdrawal  
Nightmares / sleep disturbances  
Concentration difficulties  
Declining or greatly improved grades  
Aggressive acting out  
Protective of surviving loved ones | Allow need to regress  
Give physical contact  
Have intentional times together  
Answer questions truthfully  
Watch for confusion  
Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning  
Find peer support for the child  
Work with school to tailor workload |
| 10 -12 years | Understands the finality of death  
Denial  
His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death  
Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)  
High death awareness (death may happen again)  
What if my caregiver dies?  
Formulating spiritual concepts | Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes  
Shock - Sad  
Anger - Confused  
Lonely - Vulnerable  
Fear - Worried  
Guilt  
Isolated  
Abandoned  
Anxious | Regressive behavior & fluctuating moods  
Hides feelings  
Acts like death never happened  
Aggressive acting out  
Withdrawal  
Nightmares & sleep disturbances  
Concentration difficulties  
Changes in grades  
Talks about physical aspects of illness or death | Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort  
Expect & accept mood swings  
Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.  
Find peer support groups  
Be available to listen and talk  
Answer questions truthfully  
Offer physical contact  
Give choices about involvement in death & mourning |
| Teenagers | Understands the finality & universality of death  
Denial  
His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death  
Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)  
High death awareness (death may happen again)  
May sense own impending death  
I need to be in control of feelings  
If I show my feelings, I will be weak  
Internal conflict about dependence & desiring independence  
May utilize spiritual concepts to cope | Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief  
Shock  
Sad  
Confused  
Lonely  
Vulnerable  
Fear  
Worried  
Guilt  
Isolated  
Abandoned  
Anxious | Occasional regressive behavior  
Mood swings  
Hides feelings  
Acts like death never happened  
Acts out role confusion  
Aggressive acting out  
Withdrawal  
Nightmares & sleep disturbances  
Concentration difficulties  
Changes in grades  
Impulsive & high risk behavior  
Changes in peer groups  
Fighting, screaming, arguing  
Changes in eating patterns | Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort  
Expect & accept mood swings  
Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm  
Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.  
Support relationships with understanding adults  
Be available to listen and talk  
Answer questions truthfully  
Share your grief  
Watch for high risk behavior  
Find peer support groups  
Offer physical contact  
Allow choices about involvement in death & mourning |

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Children’s Grief Education Association

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Professional intervention may be helpful when any of the above are observed in children or teens. Consider the intensity and duration of behaviors demonstrated.
Teens

“A previous death can create great anxiety for an adolescent preparing to begin emotionally separating from family.”

Considerations to Help a Grieving Teen

- Increase structure in the environment because it is familiar and can be comforting.
- Provide opportunities to talk with non-family members about the emotional impact of the loss. These opportunities can incorporate others (peers) who have had similar losses.
- Teach how to respond to people who ignore the grief or may make comments (e.g. “You need to just get over it”... or “Get on with your life”... or “It isn’t good to continue grieving”).
- Be alert for signs of depression.
- Be alert for signs of isolation. Offer opportunities for fun and/or exercise.
- Identify clear, predictable and consistent roles and responsibilities for school and home. This can help maintain boundaries in which the teen can journey through the grief process safely.
- Help or encourage the teen to keep a journal, write a letter, create a collage, comprise a poem, make a memory scrapbook, compose a song... anything creative.

Each Teen’s Grieving Experience is Unique

Grieving is a different experience for each person. Teen’s, as do adults, grieve for different lengths of time, grieve at different levels of intensity, and experience a range of different emotions.

Sadness and crying may be a common expression of grief for one teen, whereas another may respond with humor and laughter and yet another act out with inappropriate behaviors. Adults can best assist grieving teenagers by accompanying them on their journey in the role of listener and learner, and by allow the teen to function as a teacher (http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources).
Recognizing and providing constructive ways for teenagers to express their grief will help prevent prolonged or unresolved grief and depression. There are some reactions to grief that most teens feel; these are considered normal or typical grief reactions. Most teens will sense some of the following:

- *Feelings of heaviness in the chest or tightness in the throat*
- *An empty feeling in the stomach and a loss of appetite*
- *Feelings of guilt over something said or done, or left undone or unsaid.*
- *Anger and/or lashing out at others that can happen at any time for no real reason*
- *Intense anger at the deceased for dying and later feelings of guilt for being angry*
- *Mood changes over the slightest things*
- *Unexpected outbursts of crying*
- *Feelings of restlessness, and when something is found to do, finding it hard to concentrate on the task*
- *A feeling that the loss isn’t real and didn’t happen at all*
- *Sensing the deceased’s presence; expecting the deceased to walk through the door at the usual time; hearing his or her voice, or even feeling that they see the deceased out of the corner of their eye.*
- *Talking to pictures*
- *Having a conversation with the deceased in a special place*
- *Sleeplessness, or troubling dreams*
- *Assuming mannerisms, traits or wearing clothes that were favorites of the deceased*
- *Emotional regression and even bed-wetting, which can be very upsetting for teenagers*
- *A need to remember and tell things about their loved one, to a point of repetition that becomes burdensome to others*
- *A need to say nothing at all*
- *A need to become overly responsible*
- *A need to become the “new” man or woman of the household, distracting themselves from their own feelings by taking care of everyone else*

It is important to remember that grief is ongoing. It never ends. It does, however, change in its character and intensity.