

# HELPING YOUR CHILD THROUGH GRIEF

Children old enough to love are old enough to grieve. Although children may experience many of the same feelings as adults, they have a different level of understanding, depending on their age and stage of development. Through ongoing communication, caring adults can help children understand their feelings and externalize them in ways that help them through the natural, necessary, healing process of grief.

1. Be available at “teachable moments.”
2. “Listen” to your child’s words and behaviors.
3. Set aside time to talk with your child. Explain what has happened, what is occurring now, what will occur, what they can expect to happen. Welcome questions and be prepared for repetition. Answer simply and truthfully at the child’s level of understanding. Untruth can lead to a loss of trust and compound grief related problems. It’s OK to say, “I don’t know. I wonder about that, too.”
4. Use simple, age appropriate language and basic words like “die” and “dead.” Avoid phrases that “soften the blow” such as “sleeping,” “went away,” “God took them,” etc. These may confuse or frighten a child who thinks in concrete terms.
5. Be open and honest about your own feelings. Share with the child at his/her level of understanding. *You are a role model for your child.* If you hide your grief, your child will learn to “stuff” also. Your child needs to know he/she is *not alone* with his/her feelings. Children need labels for their feelings to make them less frightening.
6. Educate yourself about your own healing grief process as well as about children’s grief. Your child is likely to heal in direct proportion to your own progress towards healing.
7. Read or have available to read children’s books/stories that promote dialogue and understanding about grief and change.
8. Affirm over and over that our/your words or feelings or thoughts cannot cause someone to die. Many children carry the guilt of feeling they caused the death because of their “magical thinking.” *Your child needs repeated reassurance that this is not true.*
9. Touch/hugs say, “I know. I care. I’m here.”
10. Acknowledge the reality that grief hurts and can feel scary because of new, very intense feelings. Do not attempt to rescue the child or yourself from the emotional pain. Work through it! *Experiencing the pain is the fastest way to diminish and finish with it.*
11. Use the deceased person’s name. Share memories. Try playing “20 Questions to guess what I’m remembering.” (*Be careful not to remove all evidence of the deceased having lived.* His/her life mattered! So, does yours!)
12. Find ongoing ways to remember and honor the person who died. Children may need help remembering. Our relationship with the deceased changes, but our love continues. Anything can trigger grief. Expressing our love can help. (*We can love someone who wasn’t perfect or who did bad things, which is also important to acknowledge.*) Help your child:
  - Make a memorial album with photos, stories, drawings
  - Make a treasure box of memorabilia
  - Plant special flowers, trees, shrubs
  - Place flowers and/or a candle near a photo of the deceased on special occasions
  - Create a scholarship or award
  - Find an object to wear or carry that connects your child with the deceased such as a locket, jewelry, an article of clothing, a photo, etc.
13. Encourage expressions of grief: talking, drawing, writing, pounding, crying, yelling, etc.

14. Provide appropriate places for “grief work:” a quiet, safe place to be alone and a safe place to be angry.
15. Ideas for anger venting activities are:
  - Pound clay or play dough
  - Make “Aggression Cookies” or yeast bread.
  - Draw a picture of what makes you mad and then throw bean bags, marshmallows, or ice cubes at it.
  - Go outside and do a “large muscle activity” like jump rope, throw a ball at a wall, racket sports, tether ball, kick ball, etc.
  - Tear old newspapers, magazines, phone books
  - Throw eggs or old/cheap dishes, keeping safety and clean up issues in mind.
16. Maintain daily routine and established rules if at all possible. Continuity of “structure” creates a sense of security and stability for children. Continue to expect the child to function but temper your expectations with kindness and understanding.
17. Realize that grief can cause difficulty concentrating and a shortened attention span. Discuss reasonable expectations with the child as well as the other adults in his/her world regarding school, behavior, homework, etc. Become a caring team.
18. Your child may need someone other than you or in addition to a parent with whom he/she can grieve without upsetting Mom or Dad. Children protect their parents from their own emotional pain and don’t like adding or stirring up their parent’s pain. Find a friend, relative, neighbor, or teacher who can be available to support your child with your blessing. However, remember that you are the most important person to your child! *You alone create the warm and safe atmosphere at home for your child to do his/her healing work of grief.*
19. Help your child understand his/her grief responses to other losses/changes that accompany the death such as change in residence, caretaker, school, family role, identity, friends, etc.
20. Help your child find a supportive peer group through the school counselor or programs that support grieving families in your community.
21. Help your child’s friends learn to be supportive.
22. The following questions arise in every death and need to be answered in discussion:
  - Who else will die?
  - Will I die?
  - If Mom/Dad dies, who will take care of me?
  - Will I be all right?
  - Who am I now?

These are questions that a child works through long after the death, perhaps even into adulthood. The child’s loss by death means growing into a new identity and perhaps new roles and responsibilities. *All this takes time and energy and, of course, patience.*
23. Plan small and large events/outings that you and your child can look forward to. Everyone needs “time out” from grief work.
24. Do not be disappointed, angry, or worried if your child does not seem to understand or appreciate death. It may be months or years before this is evident. Children will regrieve (“recycle”) as they grow developmentally into their teen or even adult years.
25. Remember that your child’s grief (and yours) may take much longer than anyone wants or expects it to. Children will grieve in small episodes over many years as they mature and as grief is “triggered” by anniversaries, holidays, special events, etc. *Continue to be available to listen, remember, and validate feelings long after you think they “should be over it.”*

By the way, who listens to YOU?