

How to help... A grieving child

A Guide for Adults

Express feelings

**Grief is
unique**

Fernside

Memories

Communicate

Be present

Support

Reassure

Sports

Art

Answer

questions



FERN SIDE

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND
FAMILIES THROUGH GRIEF

This booklet was written especially for families who have experienced a death and to offer helpful advice and guidance for adults who are now raising grieving children and teens.

The most important message is:

You can't fix grief.

Caring adults who try to “fix” or “solve” a child’s grief will be frustrated. Their good intentions will not work. Instead, caring adults need to honor and support the child’s grief.

Allow the child to grieve. Be available for the child. Listen. Do not set a time limit on grief. Encourage them to share.

Help them find their own words.

Be present

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How to Tell

Inform the child as soon as possible. The child should hear the truth from someone close, not from outsiders. Waiting for the right time may cause confusion and resentment, and can damage trust.

Children need to know what happened to the body. Some want more details than others. Your child's age will determine how much detail to give them. Explain clearly, simply and honestly what caused the death.

Some things you can say:

“Her body stopped working and could not be fixed. She can’t breathe or eat anymore.”

“He was very, very sick for a long time, and there was no medicine that could help.”

“She died.”

Some things that can cause confusion:

“God needed an angel.”

“She went on a trip and can’t come back.”

“He went to sleep and won’t wake up.”

ories

Things to Consider

Some children may believe that something they did, said, or thought might have caused the death. Reassure them that nothing they did or said caused the death. Reassure that the death was not the child's fault.

Be prepared to repeat what happened. This is especially important for a very young child. Be patient. If the child was present, it can be helpful for the child to go over what happened.

Children may ask questions about the details of the death over a period of time. Let their questions guide you to how much information they need. This information can help a child make sense of what has happened.

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Memorial Ceremonies & Spiritual Beliefs

They are an opportunity for your child to remember the person who died. It can be helpful to include your child in the visitation, funeral, memorial service or trip to the cemetery.

Encourage your child to participate.

Taking part in even some of the rituals helps the child to understand and feel less alone.

Prepare your child beforehand. Describe what will happen in clear and simple terms. Tell your child what they will see and hear.

It can be helpful to ask a trusted adult to be available for your child at the visitation, funeral or memorial service in case the child needs a break.

Ask your child to help:

Choose a favorite song or story for the service.

Write a note to go inside the casket.

Invite friends and teachers.

Create a collage of photos.

Sharing what your family believes about life after death can be helpful and comforting for some children. For other children, the death might challenge their beliefs. Allow your child the opportunity to explore their questions.

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Feelings & Communication

Each individual grieves in their own unique way. Some children grieve openly while others are more quiet. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

There are many different feelings we have after a death. Some feelings will be new for your child.

It's normal for them to feel angry, guilty, frustrated and scared. Encourage safe ways for your child to express their feelings.

You might try to:

Create art

Punch a pillow

Listen to music or make music

Get some exercise

Keep a journal

Express feelings

Listen.co
Reassure

Grief is a normal response to losing someone who was loved or important.

Encourage communication. Listen carefully. Acknowledge and validate your child's feelings. Your child might be worried about:

“Who will take care of me if you die?”

“Will Susie die when she goes to the hospital to get her tonsils out?”

Expressing your own feelings can let your child know its okay for them to express theirs.

You might say:

“I can see you're feeling sad today and I'm sad too.”

“Remember when your sister used to sing that silly song?”

“I get angry too sometimes.”

“Let's look together at the scrapbook about Daddy.”

“Your Mom loved the way you played soccer.”

“I miss him today, too.”

Communicate

Sports

Art

Changes at Home

After someone dies, things can feel different in your family. Change is inevitable. You will experience big changes as well as small changes.

Try to maintain some of your normal routines. Structure can be helpful. It can feel comforting to know what to expect.

Be realistic about how much any of you can do. Everyone may appreciate a temporary scaling back from a full schedule. Allow family and friends to help.

If you can, put off any big changes. When it's time for a change, be sure to let your child know.

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Changes at School

After someone dies, it might be hard for your child to see their friends or to go back to school. While some children want to be with their friends right away, other children may need a little more time.

Having a plan and working closely with your child's teachers and school staff can help create a supportive environment for your child.

Also available from Fernside is our booklet, *How to Help Grieving Children in the Classroom*

Set up ways to help your child cope with:

Difficulty concentrating on school work.

Problems with classmates.

Days when they feel especially sad or vulnerable.

Communicate
Be present

Reminders

There are additional influencing factors that can affect the grief process in children.

Some of these are the cause of death, the relationship with the person who died and the history of losses within the family.

It's important to consider how these might affect your child.

It's important to keep in mind that:

There is no time limit on grief.

Each child is unique, including siblings.

Each child has different concerns, questions, feelings and grief styles.

Children grieve sporadically. Understand there will be times when your child might focus on the death by asking questions or crying. Other times they might seem unaffected.

Children reprocess their grief as they move through developmental stages.

Holidays, birthdays and milestones (graduations, mitzvahs, weddings, etc.) are events that can intensify grief.

Express feelings

Hug

Fernside is a non-profit organization offering support and advocacy to grieving families who have experienced a death. Fernside offers peer support for grieving families - children, teens and adults. Fernside works to increase community awareness of grief issues through community outreach.

Fernside, established in 1986 as the nation's second oldest children's grief center, remains today a national leader in providing grief support services, outreach and education to the community. Fernside is an affiliate of Hospice of Cincinnati. All Fernside services are offered free of charge.

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To learn more about our
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