

# **Small Hands Big Hearts**

**Helping a Child  
through Grief**



## Childhood Loss

From the minute our children are born it is our instinct to protect them from pain. We hold their hands to cross the street, teach them not to talk to strangers, strap on knee pads and elbow pads and helmets for even just a bike ride around the block. When our child experiences a loss our instinct is to protect them from this emotional pain as well. We might think that children are too young to deal with death, that they won't understand it, and so we avoid talking about it with them. But children are more perceptive than we might think, they can sense that something is wrong even when adults try to hide it from them. Even if a child is not fully able to understand the concept of death, when faced with a loss children too need the opportunity to grieve. With the help of supportive, loving adults a child's experience with loss doesn't have to be frightening. Instead it can be an opportunity to develop an open and trusting relationship between the child and a caring adult, and for the child to learn important lessons about death as a part of life.

### Talking to a Child about Death

Many people are uncomfortable talking about death. Before you approach the topic with your child, it's important for you to make sure you understand your own feelings about death. Take some time to think about the losses you have experienced in your own life, and how they made you feel. If possible, it's good to start having conversations about death with your child even before he or she experiences a significant loss. Have a few books about death in your child's library. Look for opportunities to broach the subject, like passing a dead bird on the sidewalk. When you speak about death be sure to use clear and age appropriate language. Avoid euphemisms about death, saying things like the deceased is "at rest," or "walking with God." Such expressions can confuse children who are already struggling to understand that death is final and irreversible. Most importantly be open with your child. Answer his or her questions honestly, and in a way your child can understand. Young children especially may ask the same question multiple times as they process the information. If you too are grieving the loss, share your feelings with your child so that she understands that it is ok for him or her to express feelings as well. Give your child a way to comfort you when you are sad, for example to offer you a hug, or a tissue. Do so at a time when you are able to describe your feelings without being overwhelmed, it can be scary for a child to see his or her parent overcome with emotion. If you are too overwhelmed with your grief to speak with your child, connect him or her with another caring adult who can offer support.



## How Children Grieve

Children grieve in a different way than adults. The intensity of grief is too overwhelming for children to experience for long periods of time, and so they grieve in spurts. A child may move fluidly between periods of grief and periods of play. Sometimes it can be upsetting for adults to see their child happily playing, seemingly unaffected by the loss they have experienced. Understand that such fluctuation is normal and that it is important for children to have these times when they can put their grief aside. Children will also often continue to grieve a loss as they grow, understanding the loss in new ways as they reach new levels of development. Certain life stages or events, such as learning to drive, getting married, or having a child of their own, may prompt feelings from a prior loss to resurface. Sometimes these new feelings of grief can hit a child unexpectedly, especially if the loss happened many years ago. It is important for supportive adults to still be present for the child, to reassure him or her that “regrieving” the loss is normal, and to be available to talk about feelings and events surrounding the loss.

Just as every child is unique, every child will react to loss in a different way. There are many factors that influence a child’s experience with grief, including the child’s age and level of maturity, his or her individual personality, the circumstances of the loss, the relationship of the deceased to the child, and the resulting changes in the child’s family life. The following are some of the common reactions to grief that children experience, but the best source of information on how your child is dealing with a loss is the child him or herself.

### Reactions to Grief

Grief is full of powerful emotions that children often have difficulty understanding and articulating. They need help to identify these feelings and express them. You can help by sharing some of your own grief feelings.

**Depression:** Feelings of depression after a loss are normal, and should not be confused with clinical depression, which is a more serious disorder that can be diagnosed by a physician or mental health professional. There are many different feelings that accompany depression after a loss. Sadness and crying are common in grief. Children may have difficulty concentrating, which can lead to problems at school. Children may feel isolated at school or withdraw from friends. There may be changes in sleeping and eating habits.

**Anger:** When children have difficulty understanding and expressing their emotions they may feel overwhelmed and react in anger. This anger builds energy that the child needs to express. While anger is a normal reaction to loss, still set boundaries for your child’s behavior, do not allow him or her to act in ways that are harmful or damaging to people or things. Instead of being destructive, you can help the child to express his or her anger in a constructive way, such as physical activity, drawing, or working with clay. At a different time, when the child is not angry, you can discuss the anger and try to help the child identify exactly what he or she is mad about.

**Guilt and Regret:** After a loss children may feel guilt over something that they have done or said, or regret something that they did not say or do but wish they had. Children may not express their feelings of guilt and regret directly; they may seem sullen or depressed, or instead they may start acting unusually good, trying to be the perfect child. It's important to ask your child about these feelings, because oftentimes feelings of guilt or regret can be irrational or based on misinformation. Young children sometimes believe that they can cause a person to die just by thinking something bad about that person. Even older children may hold on to a feeling that there was something they should have done to prevent their loved one's death. Guilt can be especially strong in the case of sudden death, where the child did not have a chance to say goodbye or I love you or to resolve any conflicts with their loved one.

**Fear:** Growing up with supportive, loving caregivers, children view the world as a place that is safe and secure. When a child loses a loved one this sense of security can be disrupted, and the child may have feelings of fear and anxiety. Often times after a loss there are other life changes as well, such as a change in family roles or an interruption in the usual daily routines. Changes in familiar roles and routines can add to a child's sense of insecurity in the world. Children may react by regressing, returning to younger behaviors that they had previously outgrown.

**Physical Responses:** In adults and children alike grief takes a toll on the whole individual, mind, body and spirit. Because children may have difficulty articulating and expressing their emotions with words, their feelings are especially likely to be expressed through physical complaints. Headaches and stomach aches are very common, as are changes in sleep and eating habits. Children in grief are more susceptible to colds and illness, or the worsening of existing conditions like allergies. Children in grief may also be more prone to bumps and bruises and have an increase in accidental injuries.

## **How to Help**

There are many ways that you, as a caring adult, can support your child in his or her journey through grief. Each child is different in their needs and wants for comfort and support, and in whom they are most comfortable receiving support from. Remember that the best source of information about your child's needs is the child him or herself.

**Talk about the loss:** Tell children about the death of their loved one using clear language that they can understand. Answer questions as directly as you can, and don't be afraid to tell a child that you do not know all the answers. If a child has questions about illness or the body it can sometimes be helpful to speak with a nurse or other medical professional. Remember that children often have difficulty understanding that death is final and irreversible, and that they may ask the same questions over and over.

**Teach children about grief and loss:** By talking to children about grief we can help to reassure them that their feelings and reactions to loss are normal and expected, and that there are ways to deal with these feelings. Children's books on grief and loss can be helpful in this process, as well as sharing with the child some of your own grief feelings.

**Listen:** It is a precious gift when your child chooses to share their deepest feelings with you. Listen to what your child is trying to express, without judgment or offering solutions or telling the child how he or she should feel. Use phrases that encourage your child to say more, such as “Can you tell me more about that?” and “What was that like?”

**Respect your child’s privacy:** Like adults, children have a need for privacy. Rather than forcing your child to talk about his or her feelings, make sure that your child knows you are available whenever he or she wishes to share. Children are also especially very sensitive to feeling different from their peers, so understand that they may not want to talk about the loss in front of other people, or be singled out for special attention.

**Encourage healthy ways to express feelings:** Children may have trouble identifying and expressing the intense feelings that can come with grief. Help children to name their feelings and to locate where they experience feelings in their body. Let children know that feelings themselves are not good or bad, they are the way our body tells us what we need and want. Teach children the difference between helpful ways to express feelings, such as drawing a picture or writing a letter, and hurtful ways, such as hitting someone or breaking things.

**Encourage play:** Children use play to express feelings and to understand and work through whatever is going on in their lives. Let children know that even in a time of loss it is ok for them to have fun, to play, to draw, to tell stories or to read books.

**Comfort through touch:** Children can feel isolated during times of grief. Physical touch helps them regain a sense of connection with those who care about him or her. Be aware of a child’s comfort level with different kinds of contact, if a child is uncomfortable with hugs and affection then try wrestling or other contact sports or games.

**Maintain a routine:** Children feel safe in a familiar and structured environment. After a loss there is often a great deal of turmoil in a child’s world. Try to maintain as many elements of a child’s regular schedule as possible, and maintain set rules and boundaries. Though it might seem kind to give a child “a break” during this difficult time and be lenient with expectations for behavior, a lack of boundaries can add to a child’s anxiety. It is important to respond to misbehavior in a way that is kind and understanding, but is also firm and clear about your expectations.

**Provide ways to remember and commemorate:** Allow your child to take part in the funeral and other remembrance activities. Consider a family project such as assembling a memory book or memory box filled with pictures and stories and other tokens from the deceased. A memory book may be especially important to children as they grow up, they can look back at the book year after year and remember their loved ones in a new way as they themselves mature and change.

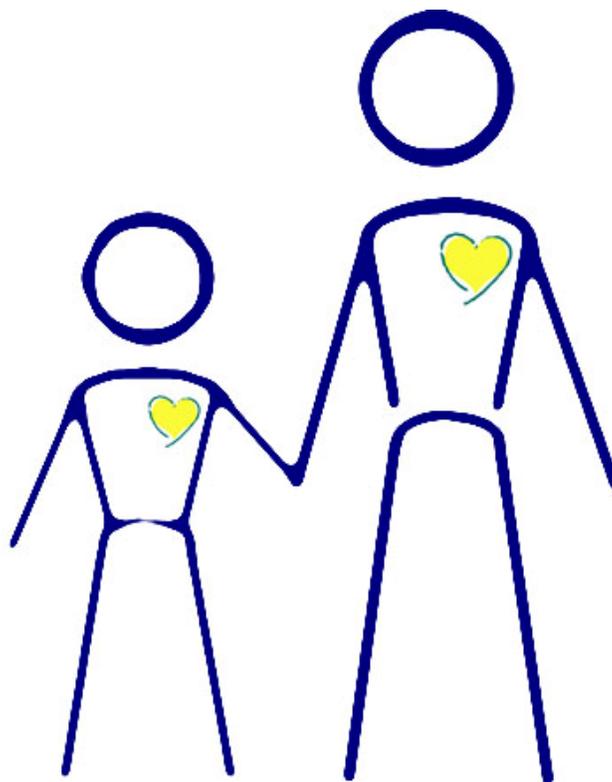
**Returning to School:** Many children want to return to school soon after a loss, get back to their friends and their normal daily routine. Before your child returns to school speak with his or her teacher and school counselor. Ask your child what information about the loss he or she would like to have shared with teachers and classmates. Children are often nervous about

becoming sad or crying in class, so let your child know that for the first few days back to school he or she can leave early if feeling overwhelmed, or can go speak with the school counselor.

**Holidays:** Special days such as holidays, birthdays and anniversaries, normally joyful events, can be especially difficult after a loss. Though you may not be in the mood to celebrate, it is also nearly impossible to simply let the day slide by unnoticed. Have a discussion with your family about how they would like to celebrate this year, about what traditions are important to maintain and what can slide. Think about starting new traditions, such as lighting a candle in your loved one's honor at Christmas dinner, or visiting the gravesite on your loved one's birthday. Remember any changes you make don't have to be permanent.

### **Never too late to care**

Maybe at the time your child experienced a loss you were unsure of how to help, or you were too overcome with grief yourself to be as supportive as you would have liked. Don't feel like you have missed the opportunity to help your child navigate his or her grief, it is never too late for children to work through their feelings surrounding a loss. Look at pictures or visit the gravesite to help your child reconnect with their grief feelings. Ask what he or she felt when hearing about the death, and at the funeral. Reassure your child that it is ok to talk about the deceased and to express feelings honestly. Even years after a loss the support and guidance of a caring adult can help a child to grow through grief and build caring relationships, personal strength, and an appreciation for the value of life.



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