



*Helping Children
Cope with Loss*



SERVING THE COUNTIES OF MARIN, SAN FRANCISCO, SAN MATEO, SONOMA,
AND THE CITIES OF AMERICAN CANYON, NAPA AND VALLEJO



Table of Contents

Children’s Grief is Different	1
Support Children by Supporting Yourself	2
About Children and Grief	2
How Long Will a Child’s Grief Last?	3
A Child’s Understanding of Death Changes with Age	4
How You Can Support Grieving Kids	9
How Counseling Can Help	11
Grief Resources and Bibliographies	12
We’re Here to Support You and Your Child	13



Children's Grief is Different

Grief is a natural response to loss. We honor your wish to better understand and help young people who are grieving the loss of someone important in their lives. Concerned adults, who understand the wide range of children's responses to grief and how to respond, can truly have a positive impact on young people.

Children's need for comfort before and after a death may be underestimated or misunderstood because children show their grief differently than adults. Like adults, each child's expression, understanding and experience of grief is unique. Factors such as age, developmental stage, personality, family and cultural background impact a child's grieving process.

Hospice by the Bay is your partner in supporting children and teens coping with loss. This booklet provides insights into a child's response to grief, answers to adult concerns and questions about how to be of help, and advice on practical ways to guide young people through the process of healing.

Reading this booklet may bring up your own feelings of grief. Please know that we are here to support you, too.

If you have questions, concerns or want to learn more about our counseling services, please call us. Help is only a phone call away.

Sincerely,

Hospice by the Bay Bereavement Department:

Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo Counties (415) 526.5699

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Support Children by Supporting Yourself

Regardless of who has died — a parent, grandparent, sibling, friend or pet — children and teens need support from adults to cope with their emotions and understand a loved one's death. Many of us aren't sure how to help a child who is grieving. Sometimes, the confusion stems from our own discomfort with the idea of death.

To be able to support grieving children, we must look at our own history of loss and understand how our own grief process differs from that of our children. Learning to cope with our own grief in healthy ways can help us feel better, as well as enable us to help others who are grieving.

About Children and Grief

There is no right or wrong way to grieve — every child and teen copes with loss differently. Children's ability to emotionally heal after a death depends on how well prepared they are for the loss, how resolved they feel about their relationship with the deceased, and the quality of support and care they receive from adults and others, both before and after the death.

Children who aren't allowed to talk about feelings or ask questions about death may experience negative outcomes later in life. The care and support you provide, including seeking counseling for your child when more help is needed, is preventative care.

Grief shared within a family after a death can also be an opportunity to deepen communication and closeness. Sharing allows each person to explore behaviors, attitudes and beliefs, and seek support when needed.

How Long Will a Child's Grief Last?

Many parents ask Hospice by the Bay's counselors how long their child's grief will last, when the pain will stop, and when he will feel better. What we know is that the most acute pain usually lessens over time. How long that process takes is different for every child, but your support can and does ease the journey.

The first year after a death is often particularly difficult as the family experiences each holiday, birthday, or anniversary without their loved one for the first time. As time goes on, coping with grief can become easier, but important, traditional family celebrations may still be difficult.



A Child's Understanding of Death Changes with Age

How children of different ages express their grief depends, in part, upon their cognitive and emotional development. While the following information provides general guidelines to help you understand your child's grief, please remember that each child has individual needs that require your understanding and support.

Young Children

Children six years old and younger have a limited understanding of death. A young child may feel sad, but periods of grief are mixed with normal play. It is common for a young child to cry one moment and seem to be happy and ready to play the next; they may alternate between these states very quickly. This is an example of how young children regulate their emotions, and the behavior is normal and appropriate. This "swinging" in and out of grief doesn't mean they no longer feel the pain of loss; they simply do not have the developmental ability to attend to it for long periods of time like an adult.

Young children often don't know how to put their feelings into words. They may express their emotions behaviorally — for instance, they may be fussy or cling more than usual. Some children may resort to behaviors from earlier stages of childhood, including bed-wetting or thumb sucking. Maintaining consistent, predictable routines is important during times of stress.

Children may also need both verbal and non-verbal support and reassurance. Offering caring gestures, such as hugs and other forms of physical closeness, can be soothing.

Because it is an abstract concept, young children often do not

understand what it means to die. Young children may not understand the finality or irreversible nature of death and that the deceased cannot come back. You may explain that the child's loved one has died and several hours later she may ask when the loved one is coming home. Children at this age have a very literal understanding of the explanations they are given. For example, one child was told that his loved one was "in the sky watching over him." The child then asked why they couldn't drive the car into the sky to bring their loved one home again.

Offer gentle, honest and concrete facts about the death rather than using abstract or vague language. Be brief. Children at this age do not benefit from detailed explanations about their loved one's illness, decline or accident. If you tell your child that their loved one was "sick," give the sickness a name. Otherwise, the child may worry that they, too, will die if they get a routine illness, such as a cold or ear infection, or that everyone who gets sick will die.

Adults are sometimes concerned that being direct and truthful about death may frighten children and therefore avoid sharing information with them. Because children are imaginative and often exhibit "magical thinking"—believing that just thinking about something makes it true—those who don't hear the truth often make up their own explanations. Frequently these explanations are scarier than the truth of the death. For instance, children may blame themselves for the death, seeing it as punishment for being "bad" or not behaving. For example, one child was told, "Mom went on a long trip and won't be back for a long time." The child wondered why Mom didn't say goodbye before she left and thought he caused her to leave because he did something wrong.

It is very important to be mindful of the words we choose when discussing the death of a loved one with children. Again, concrete, straightforward answers work best. Avoid explanations that are intended to downplay the seriousness of the topic or language that

is misleading. A child who is told that when grandpa died it was “just like going to sleep” may develop a fear of going to bed, worried that he will die if he falls asleep. A child who was told, “God took him because he was so good,” wondered if he should be bad so that he wouldn’t be taken too.

School-Age Children

Between ages 7–10, children begin to have a more sophisticated understanding of death, including its permanence. However, children this age may not understand that death is universal and that they will die someday, too. As this knowledge is developed, children may begin to worry that other adults in their world will also die and be concerned about who will take care of them if this happens. In simple language that the child can understand, offer concrete, truthful answers to her questions and support for her feelings. While you cannot honestly say that you will never die, you can reasonably let the child know that you are not dying right now, and that, no matter what, there will always be someone to take care of them.

Children in this developmental phase are often interested in the physical details of death, such as how illness affects the body, how the body disintegrates after death, or what happens during cremation. Provide explanations that are honest and age-appropriate. An older child may be able to understand and cope with certain details that are not appropriate for a younger child.

Adults should use simple terms to tell their children what they believe about an afterlife. They should also help children explore and express what they believe.

School-age children may display their emotions in a number of ways, including difficulties at school, fearfulness, or physical complaints, such as stomachaches or headaches. As with younger children, open communication, reassurance and predictable daily schedules are helpful.

Children also need to know that rules and expectations remain the same as before the death. Grieving children are still children nonetheless and will test rules and boundaries. Adults may be tempted to loosen expectations in an effort to show care and understanding. Because the death of a loved one can create confusion for children, it is important that things that can remain the same do. Maintaining established rules and routines helps provide consistency during a tumultuous time and creates a sense of safety and security. Understand that rules may be broken by the child during this time, and respond with caring, positive reinforcement of rules and expectations.

Older Children and Teenagers

After age 10, older children's and teenagers' understanding of death is closer to that of adults, but their emotional lives are not as mature. Most teens understand that everyone dies and doesn't come back again. They know that they, too, will die someday and understand that death can occur at any age. This knowledge may intensify feelings of pain and anxiety.

Older children and teens may experience intense guilt about what they did or didn't do for a loved one, such as, "I should have told him that I loved him. Now I'll never have the chance." They may direct anger at others as they try to understand why the death happened.

During their teenage years, many individuals begin defining their belief systems and may question the meaning of life. Experiencing a death at this developmental stage may intensify these existential questions, and teens may therefore feel misunderstood by peers who aren't yet grappling with these issues. In order to fit in, they may avoid talking about a death so they don't appear different. Teens who don't have peer support may feel isolated.

Teenagers who are already uncomfortable talking with adults about

emotions may become more remote or withdrawn. It is usually best not to force the conversation. Instead, provide the invitation to talk while respecting the teen's limits. Provide a stable emotional support and presence, while allowing the teen the space he or she needs to experience grief.

Whether or not a teen wishes to share feelings, adults can model openness by talking about their reactions to the death and demonstrating healthy coping skills. Share the aspects of your experience that are age-appropriate. However, teens are not yet adults and should not be asked to take on adult responsibilities left unfilled by the deceased, such as parenting siblings or managing financial burdens.



How You Can Support Grieving Kids

In general, adults help children understand and cope with the death of a loved one by being loving, accepting, truthful and consistent. Here are some specific ways you can make a positive difference.

Allow children to express feelings

To help build emotional strength and move toward healing, children need to express a wide range of emotions, with the support of family and friends. They need to be able to act out their feelings as children or teenagers, rather than with the maturity of adults. Being told, “Be brave,” “Don’t cry,” or “Take care of your mother,” can harm their natural grieving processes. Listen to what a child is telling you they are feeling without telling them how they should feel.

Express your own emotions

Young people look to adults as role models for healthy ways to express their grief. Adults and family members of all ages can share tears and comfort. Allow children to give back love by expressing care for you and others. Be sure to let children know, however, that they don’t need to fix your feelings or take care of you. Children should not be expected to take on the support role of an adult. Adults who don’t have a strong adult support system or want extra help can model good self-care by pursuing grief counseling.

Answer children’s questions, even if they ask again and again

Encourage questions, and give honest, simple answers that can be understood at the child’s age level. Try to answer the needs or emotions the child is expressing, rather than just replying to the exact words. Try to hear what the child is not saying (such as, “I’m afraid,” or “Could you die, too?”). Ask the child for clarification, if needed. Be patient with repeated questions, as children often need to hear something several times to master information. Continue to express caring and love, and provide reassurance.

Calm fears that the child may also die or somehow caused the death

Remind the child about the cause of the death — such as illness or accident. Offer reassurance that the death does not mean that the child herself or another loved one is likely to die soon. Explain that any negative thoughts about the deceased or actions by the child did not cause the death.

Offer reassurance when asked “Who will take care of me now?”

Assure the child that they are loved and will be taken care of. Show affection, and maintain the child’s normal routines as much as possible.

Support behaviors from an earlier stage of development

A common stress reaction is to temporarily revert to out-grown behaviors, such as clinginess, thumb sucking or separation anxiety. Support the child in these temporary behaviors and continue to help them develop new forms of comfort and support.

Allow children to join family rituals honoring the deceased

The funeral or memorial can be an important and supportive gathering. Rituals can offer a way for everyone to express their love and sense of loss. Rituals provide opportunities to express, explore and cope with feelings. Being at a funeral or memorial can dispel children’s fantasies about the person’s return and acknowledge the finality of death. Attendance may help them feel included and acknowledges that their feelings are important.

Adults can help by explaining, in age-appropriate detail, what will happen at the event and then allow the child to decide if or how to participate. Children should never be forced or shamed into attending a funeral or burial to “prove” their love of the deceased. Nor should they be excluded. Allow the child to do what he or she feels comfortable doing.

If the child chooses to attend, remind him beforehand about what to expect and have a supportive adult nearby in case the child needs to take a break during the ceremony. If they are old enough to do so, invite them to take part in the ceremony, allowing them to choose what they feel comfortable doing. For example, don't force them to approach or touch the deceased's body if that frightens them.

How Counseling Can Help

Since every child and teen experiences grief in a unique way, adults may question when a child needs professional support or assistance coping with loss. Parents and guardians may find themselves asking, "Is this normal?" or "Should I be concerned?" Most often, both children and adults are able to grieve their losses without professional intervention. However, a good rule of thumb is: When in doubt, ask for help. Speaking with a professional grief counselor can ease your mind and decrease anxiety about your child. When you know what is expected and appropriate, you can better provide support, should more complicated or concerning behaviors arise.

What can you expect from grief counseling for your child? Since every child's grief is different, our counselors follow the child's style of expression and natural pace of healing. We first work on basic issues: accepting the reality of the loss, expressing the many feelings that are part of grief, and adjusting to life without the loved one.

Our counselors use techniques that fit the child's age and culture. Young children often use play, rather than words, to process painful feelings. Our counselors can employ sand play or interactions with toys to help children reveal or show emotions.

Art projects can also help express emotion. Memory activities that use drawing or painting help children memorialize their loved one and connect with grief feelings. Older children and teens can be encouraged to write about their feelings in a journal.

Older children and teens especially benefit from sharing feelings and concerns with peers in support groups. Since everyone in the group has had a similar experience, group participation can decrease feelings of isolation or difference from others — such as being the only one in the class without a mom or feeling sad when others are happy.

Contact us to learn more about how we can support you, your family, and the children and teens close to you.

Grief Resources and Bibliographies

There are many books and other resources for grieving children of all ages. There are also many resources for adults about how to help grieving children. Ask your Hospice by the Bay Team or counselor for a list of recommendations.

We're Here to Support You and Your Child

Hospice by the Bay offers grief counseling and support for children and families coping with the loss of a loved one. Our care is open to all community members — you need not have had a loved one in hospice care to access our counseling services.

Here are some of the ways we can help:

- Individual and family counseling helps those adjusting to a loved one's terminal illness and those coping with a death. Age-appropriate activities for children may include talk, art or play therapy.
- Children and teens ages 7–17 can apply to attend our free, grief support, retreat weekend, By the Bay Camp™, which is held each summer.
- Counselors facilitate grief support groups at school sites to help students coping with personal losses or shared losses related to community tragedies.
- Classroom presentations provide grief education and skills to help students cope with their own feelings and support peers grieving a loss.
- In-services and educational presentations are available for counseling interns, school faculty, spiritual caregivers, human services staff and mental health clinicians working with grieving youth.

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