

Helping a Child Cope with Grief

Telling a child that a loved one has died is one of the more difficult tasks a parent may face. While some children may cry and express their feelings, others may seem unaffected by the loss or have difficulty understanding that the death of a loved one is permanent.

If your family has recently experienced a loss (including the loss of a pet), keep these tips in mind:

- ▶ When you tell a child that a loved one has died, be simple and straightforward. Provide honest, age-appropriate answers to questions and avoid overwhelming younger children with details (especially graphic details). Remember that children may not understand euphemisms like “passed away” or “went to sleep.”



- ▶ Give your child time to absorb the news. Let him or her know that you are ready to listen whenever she or he feels like talking. Check in regularly in the months following the loss.
- ▶ Ask your child if he or she would like to do something special to memorialize the deceased person or pet, such as planting a tree, drawing a picture, or putting together a photo collage.
- ▶ Children may act out their feelings through play or in behavior toward others. Some children may focus on a favorite book, movie, or game as a way of dealing with their grief.
- ▶ After a loved one’s death, a child may grow fearful that other family members will die or worry about bad things happening in the future. Validate your child’s feelings and do your best to be reassuring, but don’t make promises you can’t keep.
- ▶ Use your best judgment regarding whether your child should attend a visitation, funeral, or graveside service. Younger children may not be emotionally ready to attend these types of events.
- ▶ Try to maintain familiar routines, such as story time before bed, even when traveling for funeral services. Get your child back on her or his regular schedule as soon as possible.

Keep in mind that it may take a long time for your child to process the loss, and new feelings may emerge as he or she matures. It’s not unusual for feelings of grief to resurface on holidays, anniversaries, or when a friend loses a loved one.

LifeMatters is available to help you and your family cope with the loss of a loved one. Call 24/7/365.

Source: National Mental Health Association (NMHA)

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