

# Kids' Grief: A Resource Guide

**Griefworks BC**

A partnership between Children's & Women's Health Centre of British Columbia and Canuck Place Children's Hospice

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[www.griefworksbc.com](http://www.griefworksbc.com)

## How do I find support for a child?

- Your care team in the hospital, hospice or community can refer you and/or are usually available to talk.
- Local religious organizations support loss.
- Many web sites have information about grief.  
[www.griefworksbc.com](http://www.griefworksbc.com) can connect you to resources; give information about kids,' teen and adult grief; help you post a memorial; and link to other web sites.
- A Palliative Care Education Series is available at [www.cw.bc.ca/library/default/htm](http://www.cw.bc.ca/library/default/htm)



## How to help a grieving child

If the child asks to talk about their sibling or other child who died, sit down with them to talk. Together you can look at photos and tell stories to start the conversation.

If a child is too young to talk, share your feelings with them. Hugging and touching comforts a young child who senses intense feelings, even if they don't know what happened. Kids need reassurance when surrounded by sadness.

There is no time limit or predictable result when someone is grieving so it's hard to know if, or when, a child needs professional help. When someone is grieving, intense feelings can return anytime. If, after awhile, you don't notice that the child feels better or acts as if things are getting back to normal, see a professional.

Here are some things you can do to help your child work through the grief.

- Do a photo collage of the child who died.
- Plant a tree or create a memorial garden.
- On special days, keep a candle lit.
- Sponsor an award at a school or club.
- Create a decoration or ritual for family celebrations.
- Use your faith's rituals.
- Give out a memento of the child who died.
- Have a Fun Day once a year. Take time off work and school together in memory of the child who died.
- Volunteer your time and experience at your hospice, community agency or hospital.

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## Those worn out phrases

If we don't know what to say, we may use sayings called cliches that do more harm than good. If you say:

“Uncle Bill went to sleep.” the child may be afraid of not waking up.

“Mom's in Heaven, watching over you.” the child may feel spied on.

“God loved papa so much, He took him to Heaven.” she may be afraid that she'll be taken too.

“Now you're the man of the house.” “Don't cry.” you're expecting too much. Focus on his fears and tears.

## What makes a child afraid?

When one parent dies, a child may fear that the other one will die because usually parents keep everyone safe. When one dies, the other one's ability to keep everyone safe is doubted.

Although it's hard, say that you can't guarantee you won't die, but that it won't happen for a long, long time. Add that plans have been made for their care.

Sometimes kids believe they caused the death because they wished something bad would happen. Reassure them that they don't have the power to bring someone back **or** to cause a death.

Kids may not know what's wrong, but they usually know that something's going on. If you don't tell them the truth, it may be more confusing or scary for them.

## Teenage Years - 12 to 18 years

Teenagers know what death is. In this stage, they are torn between wanting independence from but still needing family support.

In their grief, teens may act in angry and aggressive ways or be cool and unconcerned. They may also be very critical of their parents or blame their parents or themselves for the death.

Being preoccupied with the person who died; acting immaturely; or trying to defy death by taking dangerous risks themselves are ways that teens challenge death.

Teens may think about and/or mention suicide as a possible way to be with the person who died. Their immaturity and how they see things unfold in movies and cartoons may have them imagining that it may be possible for suicide to be reversible. Usually, they're not serious about doing anything but it is crucial that you listen to, and acknowledge, their feelings and find out if they have a plan. Talk with a doctor or other professional if you're worried.

Give simple, honest explanations. Respect their ideas and feelings. Hug them and tell them they are loved. Ask for their input when considering family changes as a result of the death. Accept that they may not be comfortable talking with you about the death and encourage them to talk with another trusted adult outside the family.



## Hello,

There are no words to describe how sad it is that your child now has to face the grief of loss. Someone the child loves has died. This emotional pain is hard enough for you to bear. Now you might be wondering how to help your child. At a time of intense emotion and very little energy, you must gather together the strength to support this child's grief.

Parents and family members have said that they didn't think they could ask others for support because it might be too much of a burden. Getting that support outside the immediate family, however, really helped because it was too hard to do alone.

This booklet explains how to support kids and what to expect from them as they grieve. You may need to read it several times if you find it hard to concentrate right now. Keep it where you can easily refer to it, as needed.



## Should I tell my child?

In, "Talking About Death: a Dialogue between Parent and Child," Earl Grollman, noted author, educator and rabbi, says, "They know about death. Death education begins when a leaf falls from a tree or when they see a dead animal in the street. Even at the age of two or three, they ask about death."

One of the hardest tasks to do is tell a child that someone they love has died. You may wonder if they will understand or if it'll be too hard for them to hear. You may worry that you won't say the right words or know the right way to say them.

It's important that someone close to the child tells them as soon as possible after the death. Not telling them because it's too hard for you is unfair to the child.

Hearing by accident or from someone else may leave them more upset, because *you* didn't tell them. In thinking you're shielding them, you may be adding more pain and shock to their grief.

If you don't tell the child what happened or answer them truthfully, they'll use their imagination to fill in the blanks. The story they create may be scarier than the truth.

Let the child know that it is hard for you too and that you may cry, but crying when you're sad is natural. Reassure them that you won't cry forever. Tell them they can cry, if they feel like it, and that you'll comfort each other.

## School Age - 5 to 11 years

At this age, kids are able to understand that death is final but may think only seniors or people in accidents die. After age ten, they see the natural order of things and that death may even include them.

They may react in a physical way by crying or having a headache or sore throat. They may be angry at the person who died or not be able to believe that the death occurred.

A return to earlier skills or behavior may show up in lower grades, withdrawal from others or daydreaming. They may refuse to go to school or family events; show symptoms of the person who died; or fear they'll die the same way at the same age.

Simple, clear explanations ease fear. Tell them that it is natural to suddenly feel grief at holidays or special occasions and that they may or may not cry. *Listen* carefully to what they say and respectfully acknowledge their feelings.

Other kids may say, "I heard your sister died. Cool!" Often kids talk this way because they haven't yet experienced death, not that they're cruel. They're curious, unaware of how these words hurt. Work with your child's teacher to help the class support your child at school.

If someone dies that your child knows but you don't know, your support is still important.



## How do kids act after the death?

### Infants to about 2 years

These kids can't understand the concept of death. They sense, and react to, emotions like anxiety, anger or fear around them. They instinctively feel abandoned if parents suddenly are physically or emotionally absent.

Very young kids may be cranky, cry, get a slight rash or want to be held all the time. Parents should ask others to take over their duties so they can spend time with the kids. Hugging and touching are comforting. Keep usual routines to make kids feel secure.

### Pre-school Age - 2 to 5 years

These kids can understand that a death occurred but, for them, it's temporary & reversible. They may think the person is asleep. They may believe their thoughts caused the death or that dead people live underground.

Cartoon people return for another show after dying. In play, a kid pretends to shoot someone who comes back to life. Logically, they may ask when Uncle Bill is coming back.

They may go back to bed-wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk or fear of the dark. They may fear being left at school. They may blurt, "Susie can't talk because she's dead."



Use simple words. Explain what happens at the funeral. Use 'dead/death,' not 'passed' or 'asleep.' (These words are confusing since they don't relate to death.) Keep routines in place. Patiently answer all the questions as often as they are asked.

## How do I explain death?

Listen to *exactly* what the child asks and answer only that. Don't assume that you know what they need to know or over-answer with too much information. Kids manage facts in small pieces and need time to think things over.

One way that kids work through things is in their play. Don't be surprised if you see and hear them acting out your talks in their play.

If a child asks, "Why did Uncle Bill die?" it will satisfy them to hear it was because he got very sick. They'll ask for more details if that isn't enough for them. Answer with details but keep it short and truthful.

Use simple language in your answers. If they ask what dead means, explain that the body doesn't:

- work anymore
- need to eat or drink anymore
- feel pain anymore
- need the heart or lungs to work anymore

They might ask, "Where did Mary go?" "Who will play with me now that Sarah is dead?" It's all right to say you don't know but together you can figure it out.

Use simple words to explain your specific spiritual beliefs.

The Palliative Care Education Series in the Resources Section has more information.



## Should kids go to the funeral, memorial, or wake?

This decision is different for each kid with no one right answer. Ask and *listen* to what the child wants. If they don't want to go, maybe fear of the unknown is stopping them.

People go to funerals to publicly share their grief. Like adults, kids need a focus for their feelings. It will be more healing for them to share grief than to experience it alone.

Have the child help plan the event by picking music or a poem or an item to put in the coffin. In doing so, they learn what'll happen there & become comfortable with it. Describe the room; who will be there; what's expected of the child. Let them know that people may cry, be sad & whisper. It'll be hard, but they may want to go once they learn more.

If the child does attend, have a trusted adult other than a parent ready to escort them outside, if necessary. Having someone else do this allows parents to stay and participate.

If you forbid them to go, they may think that secret, scary things happen at funerals. Not actually seeing that the death has occurred may slow healing. They'll also miss an important life lesson.

If the funeral is far away but the child wants to say goodbye or is upset about not going, ask them to send a poem or story about the person.

## What about after the funeral?

Dr. Alan Wolfelt, an expert on child and teen grief, says that if a child is old enough to love, they are old enough to grieve.

Kids learn about grieving from adults. If an adult is open with feelings, the child usually is too. If an adult cries privately, the kid will too so both are alone in their grief which may be scary for the child.

Children grieve through play. Pretend play about big topics is a way to hear mistaken ideas. A child may say to a doll, "You're sick and now everyone else is going to get sick and die." Hearing this lets you talk with the child, giving them facts that correct their thinking.

Use simple language. Don't argue with the child. The truth takes the fear away.

Just as with adults, the child's relationship with the deceased isn't over, it's just different now. Keeping pictures and reminders of the person helps to talk about them and to begin making the memories that are necessary for healthy grieving.

As a child matures, they understand more and begin to make sense of the death and grief. They may also have the wave of grief that suddenly happens on a vacation; when something triggers a memory; or just out of the blue. Be prepared for questions or to have a talk about the person who died and all the events surrounding the death, weeks, months or even years later.