

After a loved one dies—

How children grieve and how parents

After a loved one dies—

How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

What’s covered in this guide...

- Helping children, helping the family 4
- Why a parent’s role is important 5
- Helping children understand death..... 5
- Explaining death to children..... 8
- How children respond to death 9
- Attending funerals and memorials 13
- Helping children cope over time 15
- Getting help 18
- Supporting families who are grieving..... 19
- Taking care of yourself 20
- Looking to the future 21
- Resources for support 21



Helping children, helping the family.

The death of a loved one is difficult for everyone. Children feel the loss strongly. Parents are coping with their own grief. If a parent dies, the surviving parent faces the new responsibility of caring for the children alone. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends are affected, too.

Because children and teens understand death differently from adults, their reactions may be different. Some of the things they say or do may seem puzzling.

This guide reviews how children grieve and how parents and other caring adults can help them understand death better. It offers suggestions for helping children cope. These suggestions are not meant to rush children through their grief or turn them into adults before their time. Rather, they will give them an understanding they can use now, as children, to grieve in a healthy and meaningful way.

When children get support from parents and other adults around them, it helps the entire family cope. There is less confusion, and more understanding of one another. The family sees that it can stay close even though the feelings of grief might be very strong.

How to use this guide.

This guide covers a lot of information. Some of it will apply to your situation, and some of it may not. You can read just the sections that seem most important to you right now. As things change or new situations come up, you may want to read the other sections.

Note: In this guide, “children” refers to children of all ages, including teens, except when talking about a specific age.

Why a parent’s role is important.

Your children are experiencing powerful and difficult feelings. They want guidance about what these feelings mean and how to cope. More than anyone else in their lives, they look to you for that guidance.

Your children are concerned for you, too. They wonder how you are coping. They may also worry about your health and survival. Your support and reassurance are most important for them, and can have more impact than anyone else’s.

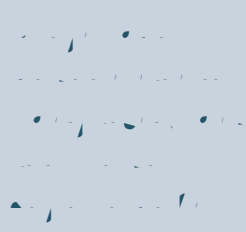
When a parent is grieving.

Talking with your children about a death is especially difficult when you’re dealing with your own grief. Children often ask the same questions adults ask themselves at such times: How could something this unfair happen? How can I go on if I will never get to see this person again? Who wants to live in a world

where this can occur? What’s going to become of our family now that this person is gone?

Especially in these difficult moments, your love and support are very important to your children. They learn how to deal with their grief by watching what you do to cope. However, if the task of explaining death feels overwhelming to you right now, you may want to have someone else assist you with the discussion. Think about giving that person this guide to read.

You can still have these conversations with your children when you are ready. They will need to discuss this more than once, and it will matter to them because it comes from you.



Helping children understand death.

Children see and hear many of the same things adults do. However, their understanding of what these things mean may be quite different. This is true with death. Adults can help children understand death accurately. This involves more than simply giving them the facts. It means helping them grasp some important new concepts.

Children are not ready to talk about death. It is important to help them understand death in a way that is appropriate to their age and development.

Four basic concepts abt b8w0.5TDp0Edec ct4H5WpA
D

WHQOQU
HDD@HFWWKIO
KKL
HWA HHW HHDV

In cartoons, television shows, and movies, children see characters “die” and then come back to life. In real life, this is not going to happen.

Children who don’t fully understand this concept may view death as a kind of temporary separation. They often think of people who have died as being far away, perhaps on a trip. Sometimes adults reinforce this belief by talking about the person who died as having “gone on a long journey.” Children may feel angry when their loved one doesn’t call or return for important occasions.

If children don’t think of the death as permanent, they have little reason to begin to mourn. Mourning is a painful process that requires people to adjust their ties to the person who has died. An essential frst step in this process is understanding and, at some level, accepting that the loss is permanent.

Sometimes, children don't react to news of a death the way their parents and other adults expect them to. There

Sometimes, children don't react to news of a death the way their parents and other adults expect them to. There



Children may express their feelings in ways other than talking. Children may use play or creative activities such as drawing or writing to express their grief. Often, they come to a better understanding of grief through play and creativity. These expressions can give you some important clues about what children are thinking, but be careful not to jump to conclusions. For example, very happy drawings after a traumatic death might give adults the idea that a child is not affected by the death when, in fact, this is more likely a sign that the child is not yet ready to deal with the grieving process.

What to do.

Offer your children opportunities to play, write, draw, paint, dance, make up songs, or do other creative activities.

Ask them to tell you about their artwork. For example, you might say, “Tell me what’s happening in this picture you drew.” If there are people in the drawing, ask who they are, what they’re feeling, whether anyone is missing from the picture, and so on.

If you’re worried that your children’s play or creative work shows they are having trouble coping with the death, seek outside help. (See the section “Getting help” on page 18.)

Children often feel guilty after a death has occurred. Young children have a limited understanding of why things happen as they do. They often use a process called magical thinking. This means they believe their own thoughts, wishes, and actions can make things happen in the greater world. Adults may reinforce this misconception when they suggest that children make a wish for something they want to happen.

Magical thinking is useful at times. Being able to wish for things to be better in their lives and in the world can help young children feel stronger and more in control. But there’s also a downside, because when something bad happens, such as the death of a loved one, children may believe it happened because of something they said, did, thought, or wished.

Older children and teens also usually wonder if there is something they could have done, or should have done, to prevent the death. For example, the parent wouldn’t have had a heart attack if the child hadn’t misbehaved and caused stress in the family. The car crash wouldn’t have happened if the child didn’t need to be picked up after school. The cancer wouldn’t have progressed if the child had just made sure the loved one had seen a doctor.

When guilt is more likely.

Children are most likely to feel guilty when there have been challenges in the relationship with the person who died, or in the circumstances of the death. Here are some examples:

- The child was angry with the person just before the person died.
- The death occurred after a long illness, and, at times, the child may have wished the person would die to end everyone’s suffering.
- Some action of the child seems related to the death. For example, a teen got into a heated argument with his mother shortly before she died in a car crash.





Children may feel guilty for surviving the death of a sibling. They may also feel guilty if they are having fun or not feeling very sad after a family member has died.

When talking with children about the death of someone close, it’s appropriate to assume that some sense of guilt may be present. This will usually be the case even if there is no logical reason for the children to feel responsible.

What to do.

Explain that when painful or “bad” things happen, people often wonder if it was because they did something bad.

Reassure your children that they are not responsible for the death, even if they haven’t asked about this directly.

Children often express anger about the death. They may focus on someone they feel is responsible. They may feel angry at God. They may feel angry at the person who died for leaving them. Family members sometimes become the focus of this anger, because they are near and are “safe” targets.

Older children and teens may engage in risky behaviors. They may drive recklessly, get into fights, drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or use drugs. They may become involved in sexual activity or delinquency. They may start to have problems at school or conflicts with friends.

What to do.

Allow children to express their anger. Avoid being critical about these feelings. Recognize that anger is a normal and natural response.

Help children identify appropriate ways to express their anger. Encourage them to talk about it with someone they trust. Suggest that they do something physical, such as running, sports, dancing, or yard work, or express the anger through creative activities, such as writing or art.

Set limits on inappropriate behaviors.

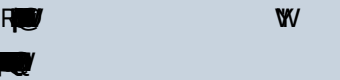
It’s not OK for children to hit or hurt others, or for teens to put themselves or others at risk in dangerous situations.

Children may appear to think only about themselves when confronted with a death. At the best of times, children are usually most concerned with the things that affect them personally. At times of stress, such as after the death of someone they care about, they may appear even more self-centered.

At a time of tragedy, we often expect children to rise to the occasion and act more “grown-up.” It’s true that children who have coped with difficult events often emerge with greater maturity. But, in the moment itself, most children, and even adults, may act less maturely.

Under stress, children may behave as they did at a younger age. For example, children who have recently mastered toilet training may start to have accidents. Children who have been acting with greater independence may become clingy or have difficulty with separation.

Children and teens can also



also

also

What is grief?

It is a natural response to the loss of someone or something that was important to you.

It is a process that takes time.

It is not a sign of weakness.

It is a part of life.

Getting support for your own grief process helps you stay available to

New York Life Insurance Company

51 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10010
www.newyorklife.com

2357A.0919