

Helping Children Deal with Death and Loss

The sudden loss of a friend or family member through death can shake our sense of reality and unsettle daily routine. Powerful emotions are often stirred up. A child's adjustment to a loss and moving through the grief process will be greatly benefited by the sensitive attention of the adults in his or her life.

The stages of grief include shock, denial, bargaining, sadness, anger, and acceptance. We do not necessarily go through these stages sequentially, but rather in a manner unique to each individual. We may need to repeat certain stages in order to express the deep emotions connected to the loss. Offering children healthy ways to process their emotions will facilitate their grief. Reading books on death and loss, writing, art projects, and simply talking about the loss all can help children adjust and move on.

Below is some helpful information adapted from the National Education Association's Crisis Communications Guide and Toolkit:

- Tell children about the death with clear, honest, age-appropriate information.
- Encourage children to express and share their feelings. Empathize with their anger and reassure them that it is part of their grief process. Help them find healthy ways to express the anger.
- Help fellow classmates who may be anxious about how to act and what to say to a student returning to school after suffering a loss in their family. Help them. Explain that it is appropriate to tell them that you are sorry for their loss and will be there for them if they would like to talk. Explain that it is probably not helpful to say things like, "you'll forget about it soon" or "cheer up."
- Correct any misconceptions children may have about death, dying and loss.
- Provide comfort.
- When appropriate, permit children to participate in memorials, funerals, or other ceremonies associated with the death. Prepare them for the experience by explaining what may happen and how they might approach grieving parents or friends to offer comfort.
- Maintain consistency and the predictability of home and school routines. Children do best in structured environments.
- Communicate with parents about the child's behavior relating to expressions of grief.
- Encourage projects such as collecting writings, drawings, and pictures into a scrapbook of memories.
- Help children create and send sympathy cards.
- Provide individual and group crisis counseling.

Good Books and Resources on Grief and Coping with Loss

- Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope With Losing Someone You Love, Earl A. Grollman
- Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child, Earl A. Grollman, Susan Avishai (Illustrator)
- Death is Hard to Live With: Teenagers Talk about How They Cope with Loss, Janet Bode, Stan Mack
- Helping Teens Work Through Grief, Mary Kelly Perschy
- Bereaved Children and Teens : A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals, Earl A. Grollman (Editor)
- 50 Facts about Grieving Children, Erin Linn
- Badger's Parting Gifts, Susan Varley
- When Dinosaurs Die: A guide to Understanding Death, Laurie K. Brown



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