

Caregivers Guide: Helping Kids After a Death

Help empower kids to cope. Coping with a death brings enormous change and big feelings for a kid. All kids, no matter their age, are able to experience grief. Kids grieve in different ways than adults and though it may never completely end, you can support them to help process their feelings. Through opportunities for self-expression, modeling your own grief journey, and finding moments to remember the person who died, you'll help a kid begin the healing process.

Where to Start?

Being honest, open, and creating a safe environment are all key to support a kid in expressing their grief. Also, remember you're not alone and that there are resources available to you, and that mental health professionals can support you during this process.

Here are some considerations that can help you talk with kids about death and create a supportive environment of healing.

- **Model healthy grieving**

Kids can be confused about their own feelings and for younger kids, they may have difficulty identifying their emotions. Help kids to connect to their feelings by mirroring healthy language when you talk about your grief. Use validating statements such as *"I sometimes feel mad too when I think about [Blank] dying."* By sharing and expressing your own emotions you can provide more comfort and safety for their expression.

- **Talk about the person who died**

You may think you're protecting a kid by avoiding conversations about the person who died. However, it's important to recognize and remember the person in order to empower kids to begin healing. It's okay to say, *"I miss [Blank] sometimes. I think about them a lot when I'm [blank]."*

- **Create rituals and opportunities to say goodbye**

Make opportunities to remember a person who has died. You can do this through special rituals to celebrate the person's life - plant a tree, light a candle, make a collage or picture, or create a special spot of remembrance. If kids don't have an opportunity to say goodbye to a person who has passed, allow for a special time for this by doing things like writing a letter to the person, or drawing them a picture.

- **Encourage kids to express in all kinds of ways**

Create therapeutic opportunities for a kid to express their grief. Many kids don't know how to verbally process their emotions so incorporate creative outlets for them to express like reading, creative expression, music, and play.

- **Listen and use what you hear as a gauge of how to respond**

Each kid experiences grief in a unique way. Be attentive to what they express and what they understand. Recognize that their perception of death is shaped by their community, culture, and lived experiences. By carefully listening and simply being there, you're offering companionship and can help address exactly what they want to know - nothing more, nothing less.

- **Help kids to understand that grief is permanent**

Help kids know that grief will be a part of their lives for a long time. It is also okay if their feelings are bigger one day, or one moment, than another.

- **Look for and understand different triggers**

Kids naturally revisit feelings as they grow, build, understand, and create new perspectives. You can anticipate some triggers, but others are more difficult to notice. Events that bring to surface feelings of grief are often ones where the absence is most felt. Triggers don't have to be event or routine based and may include things like sights, sounds, or smells. While these moments can be felt acutely, you can still help to prepare for these moments and encourage coping techniques.

- **Trust a kid's process**

Help kids feel empowered in their journey and remind them and yourself that each person's grief journey is unique and incomparable. Let them share when they're ready and do not push them to talk if they don't feel like it. Your job is to help them through this by being with them to support, listen, and understand.



Help Your Kid Explore Their Grief

Kids need other creative outlets to be able to share and express their grief. Here are some ways to help kids explore their feelings through creative expression.

- 1** Fold a piece of paper in half. On one side draw how it feels when people say things that don't make the kid feel good, and on the other how it would feel if people asked or said the things they want.

Use this as a guide to begin discussing the questions:

- Sometimes people don't know what to say when someone dies. What do you wish people would ask you or say to you?
- What are some things that people say that make you mad or sad?

- 2** Set a timer for 5 minutes and together write as many memories as you can think of before the timer rings. Read the memories aloud to each other and see if you remember the same things.

- 3** Create a memory box by decorating a box and putting keepsakes of the person who died or memories the kid wants to write down and include. They might want to put something in the memory box that's private and just for them. Take turns sharing thoughts, memories, or wishes.

Ask guiding questions to help begin conversation like:

- How does it feel to have these memories and talk about them aloud?
- We get to keep our memories forever, where is your special place for them?



- 4** Look around your house, or at school, and think about what grief looks like to help a kid visualize their feelings. Have them draw a picture or use collage materials like magazine cutouts to represent what they think grief looks like.

Ask guiding questions that help understand their drawing:

- Is your grief messy, sad, or confusing?
- What colors are in it?
- What would you say to someone else who was going through the same things as you are?
- Afterward, encourage them to write down advice they'd give to other to help them to connect to the tools and resilience that live inside of them.

- 5** On a piece of paper have a kid draw a line without lifting their pen to show what all the feelings they're experiencing right now look like. For example, anger could be a jagged line or peace a slow loopy line.

Ask guiding questions to help begin conversation like:

- Have you ever noticed that ignoring feelings can make them stay longer or feel bigger?
- What are some feelings that might grow inside you if they are trapped inside?

For more resources for caregivers visit artwithheart.org/learn

For more information on how to help grieving children, visit Safe Crossings Foundation, safecrossingsfoundation.org and National Alliance for Grieving Children, childrengrieve.org

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SOURCES:

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