

Helping Your Child or Teenager Through The Death of a Classmate

Children's Grief Awareness

National
Alliance for
GRIEVING CHILDREN

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This is a packet of information from various sources provided to you to help understand your child or teenager during the grief process. For further information or assistance, feel free to contact St. Anthony's Hospice at 270-826-2326.



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When Your Child's Friend Dies

The death of a friend is a very painful event for children. Here's how to help your child cope with the loss.

By Tamekia Reece



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It's hard to wrap your mind around the idea that a child you know has died. When that child was your child's friend, it's even more devastating. And as you deal with your own feelings about the loss, you have to explain it to your kid. Help him cope by following these steps.

Share the News Choose a quiet and unhurried time and setting. Your child will need your support, so make sure you're calm. Keep the conversation simple and age appropriate, along the lines of "Something sad happened to

your friend Ben. He was really sick and he died last night." You may have to explain what "died" means for young children who don't yet understand death. "For example, you could say, 'Sometimes, people get very sick-with a special kind of sickness-that can't get better and their bodies stop working,'" says Marla W. Deibler, Psy.D., a psychologist and executive director of the Center for Emotional Health of Greater Philadelphia, LLC. If illness didn't cause the child's death, you might say, "Amber was in a car accident and her body stopped working." Be careful not to share explicit details of the child's death.

Kids will be very concerned with how the friend's death will affect them, so it's also important to make it clear to them what they can expect, says Michelle P. Maidenberg, Ph.D., clinical director of Westchester Group Works, in Harrison, New York. Explain that the two of them will no longer have playdates, or the friend won't be able to attend birthday parties, or that your child won't see her friend at school anymore, Dr. Maidenberg says.

Comfort Your Child Allow her to express her emotions freely. Hug her tightly and hold her while she cries. Let her know it's okay for her to feel sad or mad. Then share some of your own feelings: I feel really bad about what happened to Amber. I'm going to miss her and I know you will too." Encourage her to ask questions, and then answer them honestly and simply. Let her know you're there for her anytime she has questions or needs to talk to someone.

Offer Reassurance One of your child's worries, whether he voices it or not, will be that something similar will happen to him or to a loved one. "It's important to reinforce to the child that he is safe and so are his loved ones," Dr. Maidenberg says. If the friend died because of illness and your child is concerned about his own health, Dr. Maidenberg suggests you say, "Most kids your age don't die. There are a very few who, unfortunately, have illnesses or accidents, but most kids grow up and live until they're past Grandma's age." If a tragic accident caused the friend's death, focus on the

ways your family tries to stay safe, by following the speed limit, always wearing a seatbelt in the car, and looking both ways before crossing the street.

Prepare for the EmotionsA friend's death always causes emotional turmoil. For kids, it's even worse because they may not fully understand what's going on and this may be the first time they hear about a child dying. Your child might feel sad, angry, confused, shocked, depressed, or a number of other emotions. Some children go through a period of denial, and younger kids may show regressive behavior, such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking or wanting to sleep in the parents' room. To help you and your young child understand his feelings, read books together like *The Grief Bubble: Helping Kids Explore and Understand Grief* by Kerry DeBay and *Why Did You Die?: Activities to Help Children Cope with Grief and Loss* by Ellen Goldring and Erika Leeuwenburgh. For preteens and teens, *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing* by Marilyn E. Gootman Ed.D. can help them better cope with confusing and painful emotions.

Help Her Say GoodbyeWhen a child's friend dies, many parents struggle with the decision to allow the child to attend the funeral. The ceremony may help your child process her friend's death, but make sure you consider your child's personality. If she's very sensitive or has difficulty seeing others express extreme emotions, it may be best to keep her home. She can say goodbye or remember her friend by later placing a flower on the grave, making a scrapbook of the two of them, sharing stories about her friend, or writing a goodbye letter to her deceased friend.

Seek HelpHow long your child grieves depends on his age and his relationship with the deceased friend. Allow your kid to go through the process at his own pace, but don't overlook signs of trouble. Some red flags: problems with daily functioning, such as sleeping and eating, social isolation, extreme changes in academic performance and/or refusal to attend school, aggression, lack of interest in activities he once enjoyed,

hyperfocusing on death or talking about being with the deceased friend. If you notice these signs, Dr. Maidenberg says, your child may need help to cope with the loss.

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By Tamekia Reece



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General Guidelines

1. **Always offer opportunities for healing.** We are all individuals, and kids are too. Some will want to experience everything they can—go to groups, have individual counseling, etc. Some will want to hang back and watch. And some don't want to do it at all. But it is still important that as a caregiver you give them the option for every experience so that they feel some control over the sometimes overwhelming emotions of grief, as well as they know you will be there for them when they need someone.
2. **Do not ignore your grief.** Every time someone rides an airplane they review the safety measures and tell you that if you are riding with a child, put your own oxygen mask on first before putting your child's on. This is because you have to be able to function to care for that child. This is true with grief! You must take care of yourself before you can take care of your child. Now there are times you should grieve with other adults, but don't be afraid to acknowledge to your child when you are having a bad day. Something like, "Mommy's a little sad today because she is thinking about Grandpa a lot. It's normal to have sad days while we are getting used to him not being here." This opens up the avenues of communication and the child learns that it is not only okay to have sad days, but you can talk about your grief too.
3. **Answer their questions honestly!** Kids pick up very quickly when an adult is not being truthful. Pair that up with their tendency to "fill in the blanks" and you have a recipe for disaster! Answer what they are asking, even if you have to say, "I just don't know right now..." Then check back with them later to make sure they don't have follow up questions.
4. **If you overhear them telling something that is not correct, talk to them in private about this.** They need to have a realistic understanding of what has happened, so you need to clear up any misconceptions. For example, "I heard you tell Susie earlier that Daddy was killed in the war. I'm wondering what you are thinking about that..." They may tell you that they are aware it was not true but wanted to say that. Or they may tell you something that you didn't even know was going through their heads. It's important to ask!

5. **Keep their rules and boundaries in tact!** This sounds obvious but is hard to do when everyone is grieving in the household. But if it was not okay for them to, for example, curse prior to the death, it is still not okay afterwards. They will test the boundaries and rules to see if that part of their world has changed as well. In doing so, what they are reassuring themselves is that even with a death, there are still things the same, (which they need to know). There are still chores, rules, homework, etc. That is life.
6. **But, if there has to be an adjustment in rules/chores...** If you need to change something in their life by necessity, then talk to them about it before-hand to get their input. For example, if Grandma was always the babysitter for your younger children, and now it's going to be an older sibling. Talk to the older sibling about this need, then talk to them. If you need children to add chores, talk to them about it, explaining why it's a need and get their input. It's not an option that it doesn't occur, but they can work with you on how it occurs, (like in the previous example, maybe you can offset the time the older sibling loses texting their friends by giving them longer on their phone at night, or whatever works with your value system). Usually when children are part of the problem solving process, they become invested in it, which helps you and them in the long run.
7. **Remember that you are the caregiver, not their friend.** When we lose someone very close who was a confidante, it's easy to find yourself turning to your children- whom you are with more often- to fulfill the need for adult conversation. Until they are truly adults, however, this shouldn't happen. Look for other opportunities- at work, volunteer at schools or other places, at church- to get this need filled. But DO fill it... your life cannot be only rotated around your children, (see number 2 above).
8. **Encourage them to widen their "coping skills."** These are ways that all people deal with stress. We are looking for healthy ones, so in general we set the boundaries of: if it doesn't hurt yourself, hurt someone else, or destroy property—it can be used to cope with any of life's events. Have them think of active ones- run, walk, ride bike, jump on trampoline, skate, dance, sports, etc. Have them explore passive ones- write, draw, listen to music, pray, read. Have them make their connections with supportive people- peers, teachers, guidance counselors, church members, extended family, adult friends. Remind them of what works when they are having their moments of stress, (works for adults too).
9. **Don't be alarmed if children revisit the grief at their next developmental stage.** As our brain matures and we go through more life experiences, all of us look back at our past with different eyes. This is normal and to be expected. Usually their "grief burst" will be briefer than the initial grief, and using the same things that worked before can help them through it.

10 Steps for Parenting Your Grieving Children

A framework for thinking about your children's grief

- The goal is to support your children in their natural healing.
- You are working through your own grief at the same time as you are helping your children.
- You may be afraid that your children have been or will be damaged by their loss and bereavement.
- Children process what has happened and is happening according to their own developmental level. A small child, a school age child, and a teenager will all understand and experience the death of an important person differently—and that will change for each one of them over time.
- Children's grief looks different from adult grief.
- Children will need to re-work their understanding of death and/or loss again at each developmental level. Expect this to happen.

From: ⁻¹⁻ 10 Steps for Parenting Your Grieving Children
by Anne Hatcher Berenberg, Vicki Scalzitti,
and Jack Cain

Grief by Ages

"Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve." Alan Wolfelt, PhD

Young Infants- Birth to =1 year of age

- Up to 6 months, there will be no grief reactions as the capacity to form relationships, and so grief over the loss of them, does not yet exist. Distress will be shown if the death interferes with the baby's basic needs.
- From 6 months to a year, the child may show some nonspecific ongoing distress in reaction to being separated from the primary caregiver.

Ways to help this: Provide the infant with a consistent caregiver.

Older Infants- 1-2 years of age

At this stage three phases are common in response to separation and loss: 1) Protest: loud, angry, tearful behavior demanding and expecting reunion. 2) Despair: misery, depression, and a sense of abandoning hope. 3) Detachment: apathy- children appear to be indifferent to separation.

In general, children at this age have no control over their grief reactions which will almost always be expressed overtly.

Ways to help this: Routine and a primary caregiver are helpful for this age.

=2 to 6 years of age

- May seem uncaring or unemotional when confronted with a death. May respond with "Oh. Can I go play now?" This does not mean that the death has no impact but rather reflects the cognitive and emotional capacity of the children!
- The child may constantly has questions such as "When is Daddy coming back?" etc
- The loss can be so painful and frightening that the child may alternately approach and avoid his/her feelings.
- Many don't know how they should feel and so confront visitors or strangers with statements like "My mommy died!" in order to pick up on clues on how to respond or react.
- Children often act out their grief through playing in which the death or the funeral is reenacted in order to master the loss, (often seen in drawings too).
- Regressive and clinging behavior may occur such as wetting, soiling, not talking.
- Temper tantrums, irritability, sullen or withdrawn behavior may also occur
- Any separation such as day care can be stressful but it usually short lived (4-6 weeks).

Ways to help this: Routine, simple preparation, (what to expect, answering questions, and who will be doing what), and consistency are helpful for this age.

=6 to 9 years of age

- Children in the age group often turn to denial as a defense mechanism.
- The tendency is to not ask questions, thus maintaining the denial.
- Many carry on as though nothing has happened. The outer life looks unaffected but the inner life suffers.
- Because the child seems unaffected, support is not offered resulting in the mourning process being repressed.
- Children at this age have strong feelings of loss but extreme difficulty in showing it. Boys particularly have difficulty and frequently exhibit aggressive responses and play patterns.
- School issues can arise.
- Guilt is a strong factor at this age. Children often revert to “magical thinking” and feel that they in some way caused the death.

Ways to help this: Children at this age need permission to grieve by the adults in their lives. They need the facts and frequent “check backs” to make sure they haven’t filled in blanks incorrectly. They need routine as well, but can handle changes in them with notice. Interaction with school personnel should occur so teachers/guidance counselors are aware of loss.

=9 to 12 years of age

- Children in this group are usually shocked by news of a death.
- Grieving patterns are similar to adults, but more influenced by media perspectives.
- Children will try to make sense of the death and come up with reasons that help them understand.
- Although there are great feelings of loss and grief, there is an equal need to present a strong ‘coping’ exterior. Boys, in particular, strive to appear strong and in control.
- It’s easier to display anger and irritability than to open up. This may not be seen as a grief response.
- School issues are common in this age group.
- The child may adopt habits, mannerisms, or hobbies in an effort to keep the person alive

Ways to help this: Children must be encouraged over and over again to talk about the loss and express their feelings. If allowed, comfort items that belonged to the deceased should be provided, (favorite sweater, pictures). Participation in sports or other extracurricular activities

should be encouraged. Interaction with school personnel should occur so teachers/guidance counselors are aware of the loss. Discuss changes to routines before they happen, if possible.

=12 years of age through adolescence

- Common grief reactions include confusion, depression, guilt, shock and anger.
- These reactions are complicated by the normal changes occurring with adolescence.
- This age group naturally exhibits great egocentrism, narcissism, and self preoccupation. Traumatic events are evaluated in terms of how the event affects them personally.
- During this period of increasing independence, the loss of a parent can be especially devastating. The teen has to cope with the shock of realizing how much the parent was loved and needed at a time when “cutting the apron strings” is a major focus.
- Guilt is very common over normal adolescent power struggles.
- Adolescents often dramatize their reactions. For examples, they may isolate themselves by locking themselves in their room and not talking, eating, etc.
- Physical reactions include crying, headaches, insomnia, digestive upsets, and exhaustion.
- Temporary decreases in school performance are common.
- They often test the ‘invulnerability’ by challenging death through reckless behavior. Drug/alcohol use and/or sexual promiscuity are not uncommon.
- Teens usually feel very different from their peers.
- Explosive anger, depression, and withdrawal are common.
- Many teens must take on increasing responsibilities for their household, thus leading to resentment, increased anxiety, etc.

Ways to help this: Teenagers need to also be allowed to express their grief and not “act like an adult.” Realistic boundaries and rules need to stay in place as before the death. Checking in with the teenager about changes in the household is important. Develop or encourage positive adult interactions within their lives during this time.

Please note: if you have more than one child, each one will respond to the death in their own, individual way.

** Much thanks to TLC Group for some of the information used in this section.

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It is a natural tendency for parents and adults to try and insulate a child from the pain and shock of a death. Unfortunately, this tendency is not helpful for children and often results in fear, anxiety and confusion. What is helpful are statements which simply and honestly give the information requested and assure the child that he or she is loved and will be taken care of. This section offers some suggestions on what to say and what not to say to a grieving child.

"Avoidance of the realities does not protect children but may add to their fears." — Edna Furman

"What is said is important but how it is said has even greater bearing on whether the child will develop anxiety and fears or accept, within his capacity, the fact of death." — Earl Grollman

"... they will make up their own answers, which are usually very mixed up and much more frightening" — Anna Freud

What To Say	What Not To Say
We will never forget him	She's been put to rest
Your sister is dead	He will live eternally
When you are dead, the body does not move	You still have other siblings to play with
It isn't anyone's fault	We must be brave and accept God's will
Daddy loved you very much	God took Mommy to Heaven
Your brother can never come back	Your sister has gone on a long journey
It's ok to cry	Grandma died because she was sick
Yes, it's tough	Be a man
The rest of us will take care of you	You'll have to take care of Mommy now
It's ok to be angry	Be a strong soldier
No, it isn't fair, is it?	Daddy's watching you from Heaven
I wish I could take the hurt away	He's so much better off in heaven
I don't know	Your brother went to sleep and won't wake up
It isn't your fault	Try to put it behind you
It's all right to laugh and play	You're too young to understand
Being dead doesn't hurt	I understand exactly how you feel
You're not going to die too	You're the Man of the House now
If you don't know, just give a hug	Only the good die young

Online Resources:

NAGC → National Alliance for Grieving Children
 Achildgrief.com

Bibliography

Books can be a way to help children learn about what grief is and normalize what they are feeling. It is not uncommon that a child will want to read and reread a book that appeals to them. Here are some recommendations:

Recommended Books for Children Ages 3-8

- Brown, M.W., The Dead Bird, Young Scott Books, NY, 1958
Brown, L.K. & M., When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death, Little Brown & Co., 1996
Buscaglia, L., The Fall of Freddie the Leaf, Holt, Rinehart
Haas, S., Daddy's Chair, Kar-Ben Copies Inc., 1991
Hague, M., The Velveteen Rabbit, Holt, Rinehart, Winston
Hickman, M., Last Week My Brother Anthony Died, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1984
Mellonie, B. & Ingpen, R., Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, Bantam Books, 1983
Miles, R., Annie and the Old One, Little, Brown and Company, 1971
Old, W., Stacy had a Little Sister, Albert Whitman & Co., 1995
Rogers, F., When a Pet Dies, GP Putman's Sons, 1988
Rothman, J., A Birthday Present for Daniel: A Child's Story of Loss, Prometheus Books 1992
Sanford, D., It Must Hurt A lot: A Child's Book About Death, Multnomah Press, 1986
Simon, D., A Taste of Blackberries, Cromwell, NY, 1974
Simon, N., The Saddest Time, Albert Whitman & Co.
Viorst, J., The Tenth Good Thing about Barney, Atheneum, 1971
Virginia, J., Saying Goodbye to Daddy, Albert Whitman & Co., 1991

Recommended Books for Children Ages 9-12

- Carrick, C., The Accident, Seaburg Press, 1976
Clifton, L., Everett Anderson's Goodbye, Holt, Rinehart and Winston
Coburn, J.B., Anne and the Sand Dobbies, Seabury Press, 1964
Cohen, J., Why Did it Happen? Helping Children Cope in a Violent World, Morrow Junior Books, 1994
Douglas, E., Rachael and the Upside Down Heart, Price, Stern and Sloan, 1990
Exupery, Antoine de Saint, The Little Prince, Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich
Fine, J.C., The Boy and The Dolphin, Downeast Graphics 1990
Fisher, F., A Punkin in the Frost, Cammiumm Phate Pab, 1993
Jampolsky, G., Straight from the Siblings: Another Look at the Rainbow, Celestial Arts, 1982
Krementz, J., How It Feels When a Parent Dies, Alfred A. Knopf, 1983
Lewis, C.S., Chronicles of Narnia, Macmillan (set of seven books)
Madenski, M., Some of the Pieces, Little, Brown & Co., 1991
Whitehead, R., The Mother Tree, Seabury Press, NY, 1971

Recommended Books for Teens

Blume, J., Tiger Eyes, Dell, NY, 1981
Cleaver, V & B., Where the Lillies Bloom, JD Lippincott, PA, 1969
Mandino, O. and Kaye, B., The Gift of Acabar, Bantam Books
Mills, L., The Rag Coat, Little, Brown & Co., 1991
Paulus, T., Hope for the Flowers, Paulist Press
Rofes, E., The Kid's Book About Death and Dying, Little, Brown & Co., 1985
Silverstein, S., The Giving Tree, Harper and Row
Sims, A., Am I Still A Sister?, Starline Printing, 1992
Smith, D., A Taste of Blackberries, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973
Varley, S., The Badger's Parting Gift, Mulberry Books, 1984
Walker, To Hell with Dying, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Pub, 1988
White, E.B., Charlotte's Web, Harper and Row, 1952
Fry, V., A Part of Me Died, Too, Dutton Children's Books, 1995
Gootman, M.E., When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens about Grieving and Healing, Free Spirit Publishing, 1994.
Hipp, E., Help for the Hard Times: Getting Through Loss, Hazelden, 1995
Mahon, K.L., Just One Tear, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1992
O'Toole, D., Facing Change Falling Apart and Coming Together in the Teen Years, Mountain Rainbow Press, 1995
Paterson, K., Bridge To Terabithia, Harper Collins, 1977
Richer, E., Losing Someone You Love: When a Brother or Sister Dies, GP Putman's & Sons, 1986
Spies, K., Everything You Need to Know About Grieving, Rosen Pub, 1990
Talbert, M., Dead Birds Singing, MA, 1985

Parent Resources

35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child, Portland, OR: The Dougy Center, The National Center for Grieving Children and Families, 1999
Helping Children Cope with Death. Portland, OR: The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families, 1997
Helping Teens Cope with Death. Portland, OR: The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families, 1999
What About the Kids? Understanding Their Needs in Funeral Planning & Services. Portland, OR: The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families, 1999.
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