

FACT SHEET FOR PEOPLE HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUTH SURVIVORS OF LOSS

COPING WITH GRIEF IN CHILDHOOD

Grief is the physical, mental, and emotional response that comes from losing someone or something important. Children experience death-related grief differently than adults, and their responses vary due to many factors.

This fact sheet contains information about some of the signs of grief and provides useful information about how to help a child or youth cope. In addition, the Helpful Resources section provides resources for more information and how to connect individuals to support and treatment options if someone needs additional help.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Do not assume a child's understanding of death and grief simply based on their age. Instead, ask them to talk about their ideas and what they already understand about death. When you open the lines of communication and actively listen, you will better understand what they still need.

Ask the child how they feel and to share their thoughts and ideas before offering explanations to them. Younger children might be comforted more by physical presence and play where as older children and teens may find greater comfort through more direct conversation. Sometimes, children and youth may ask for help from those outside of their family such as friends, teachers, mentors, coaches, or other trusted adults. Parents or caregivers may want to also ask these types of people to help them support their child.

COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

Grief is a natural reaction to death. Sometimes children and youth grieve in similar ways as adults, but they can also grieve differently. Some ways that grief can manifest in children and youth include:

- ▶ Depression or loss of interest in daily activities
- ▶ Problems sleeping, loss of appetite, fear of being alone
- ▶ Returning back to younger behaviors (like bedwetting or thumb sucking)
- ▶ Expressing or believing that they can see or speak to the person who has died
- ▶ Drop in school performance
- ▶ Withdrawal from peers and social activities
- ▶ Irritability, anger or acting out

GRIEF IS DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

Grief is unique for everyone, but children in different stages of development experience death differently. Young children, usually under the age of about 8, may feel and/or understand that there was a loss, but not understand that death is final. Older children and teens may have a better understanding of death, but may still have trouble understanding and/or expressing their feelings. Children and youth can express a wide range of behaviors, including sometimes acting out or acting younger than their age in response to grief.



IT'S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP

Although grief is normal, it can still be very difficult, overwhelming, or bring on a crisis. If anyone is struggling with grief, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline can connect them with counselors that can provide support any time after a loss.

Sometimes, people can have extraordinarily intense and/or long-lasting grief responses that impact their everyday life. In these situations, it is especially important to think about connecting that person to a mental health professional. Certain symptoms lasting longer than six months in children and youth can point to the presence of a condition called Prolonged Grief Disorder. They may also be having symptoms of other mental health and/or substance use disorders.

Parents, caregivers, and others who are grieving should also make sure to take care of themselves, including getting support for grief as needed.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Text or call 988 or chat 988lifeline.org.
- **Find Support:** To learn how to get support for mental health, drug, and alcohol issues, visit [Findsupport.gov](https://findsupport.gov).
- **Find Treatment:** To locate treatment facilities or providers, visit [FindTreatment.gov](https://findtreatment.gov) or call SAMHSA's National Helpline at 800-662-HELP (4357).
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network*** www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/traumatic-grief
- **Sesame Workshop Grief Resources*** <https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/grief/>

**Inclusion of non-federal resources on this Fact Sheet is for educational purposes only and does not imply a formal endorsement by SAMHSA or the U.S Department of Health and Human Services.*

HOW TO PROVIDE SUPPORT

The ways to help children and youth vary and each situation is different. What may be helpful for one person may not be helpful or may even be harmful for another. This varies by factors like their developmental stage, the relationship of the child with the deceased, and many other factors. Here are some ways to help:

- ▶ Provide soothing touch like hugs and handholding when welcomed and appropriate
- ▶ Be a calming presence and speak gently using words they can understand
- ▶ Follow their lead including during play times
- ▶ Be honest and balance providing enough detail about what is happening, while avoiding details that may not help them cope
- ▶ Allow time to grieve, but also try to return to routines when able and as appropriate as it reinforces stability
- ▶ Be supportive and respectful of any cultural, faith-based, spiritual or bereavement and grief-related beliefs and traditions
- ▶ Encourage healthy activities, hobbies, and artistic expression such as exercise, listening to music, yoga, mindfulness, meditation, writing, or dancing
- ▶ Be patient with and understanding of any changes in behavior
- ▶ Allow them to feel and/or express a mix of emotions at once or close to each other such a happiness and sadness
- ▶ Reassure them of your current and continued presence, care, and/or support

Find more resources on our website using this QR code or go to samhsa.gov/coping-bereavement-grief

