

A Grieving Child

Loss and grief can be hugely disruptive and disorienting, whether a person is 4, 40, or 94. When an important person or relationship is gone from someone's life, it can be challenging to understand what happened, figure out how the world works now, and find a way forward. For children and adults alike, there is no way to return to the “before” this happened, but it is possible to rebuild. Just like with adults, children's grief encompasses the emotional, cognitive, physical, functional, and behavioral reactions to death.



Common Responses To Grief in Children Include:

- A wide range of emotions that can alternate between sadness, loneliness, confusion, anger, fear, worry, joy and happiness, and so much more.
- Changes to behavior and eating patterns.
- Clinginess or separation anxiety.

Like adults, every child will grieve in their own way, and their grief often looks very different from that of the adults around them. Some may readily talk about death; others may seem to avoid the topic altogether. Younger children especially may struggle to understand that death is permanent. Caregivers may be surprised to see children eager to return to play, hobbies, friends, and school, but this is all completely normal.

Factors Influencing How A Child Copes Include:

- The emotional and developmental stage of the child
- Personal, social, and cultural experiences
- Support from caring adults
- The context for how their loved one died
- How disruptive the death has been to their daily lives
- How death may be portrayed in popular media or the arts

With support and access to needed resources—both immediately after the loss and as they continue to process it through subsequent developmental stages—children can adjust to loss in ways that allow them to lead happy and productive lives.

What Does A Grieving Child Need?

Bereaved children do best when caring adults are around to respond to their needs, questions, and reactions. Often the adults around a bereaved child are grieving as well, and it may be an incredibly difficult time for everyone. Children also learn a great deal about grief by watching how the adults around them respond to it. Here are some specific things caregivers can do.

Talk About The Death

Don't avoid the subject. Children are perceptive and often know that something is wrong. Provide age-appropriate and truthful information. Try not to say that a loved one has "passed away," "gone to sleep," is "lost," or has "crossed over." Children often interpret things very literally and need language that helps them understand. Using the words "died" and "dead" can go a long way.

Talk About Grief

Grief is a completely normal and natural response to losing someone or something. It is neither a single emotion, nor does it have any timelines or specific rules. When we lose someone significant, our sense of self changes—and that is true for children too. Children may talk about their grief intermittently, during playtime or school, and this is completely normal. As long as habits are healthy, there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Be Consistent With Daily Routines, to the Extent Possible

Routines matter to children, especially after a loss. To the extent possible, try to keep routines that provide structure and familiarity, offer comfort, and help make life feel a bit more stable when it becomes topsy-turvy. Regular mealtimes, naps, and bedtime stories are more important than ever.

Care For The Caregivers

Children thrive on connections with their caregivers, and this is especially true in the aftermath of a death. Primary caregivers may need additional support as they navigate both their own grief and the grief of their children. Perhaps trusted family and friends can step in to assist with practical matters, such as running errands, childcare, or yardwork. Professional support may be useful for both children and adults.

Let Them Play

Children need to play. It's what they do, how they learn, how they process hard things, and how they connect with others—especially when they are grieving. If they're ready to return to school, friends, and activities, let them. Returning to routine and predictability may help some children cope and adapt to their loss.

Support Expressions Of Grief

Just like adults, children need to be able to express their grief in their own way, and they need to know that it's okay and healthy to do so. Whether it involves a hug, snuggling, crying, or drawing a picture of a favorite memory, provide plenty of opportunities for them to share their thoughts and emotions.

Should Children Attend The Funeral?

Families often ask whether children should attend the funeral and other mourning rituals. There is no single right answer, as much depends on the child's age, their comfort level, and cultural and family traditions. Attending can often help children understand death better and be part of the community of grievers, though some parts can also be upsetting. If children will attend, prepare them for what they may see and hear, and ask a trusted adult to stay with them so they can take a time out if needed.

Watch For Warning Signs

Most children will find their way through grief and, in time, find happiness in life. But some young people will have a more difficult path—especially those with limited support and resources, or those who have weathered other difficult events. New fears, developmental delays, clinginess, and risk-taking behaviors are signs that it may be time to seek help from grief experts in your community.

