

Talking with kids and teens about death and loss

Practical tips for parents and carers

Grief is a part of being human, and children experience it too. Even when adults want to protect kids from sadness, talking openly and gently can help children feel supported and less alone.

Understand that children grieve differently

- Children may grieve things adults do not expect or recognise as grief.
- They might show sadness, confusion, anger, withdrawal, relief, or move in and out of emotions quickly.
- What looks like “they’re coping fine” may simply be their way of processing things.
- There is no right way for a child to grieve, just as there is no set way for adults.

What this means for parents

- Try not to judge how your child reacts or compares to others.
- Let go of expectations about how sad, calm, or expressive they “should” be.
- Accept that their grief may come and go over time.

Use simple, honest language and keep it human

- Many adults worry about saying the wrong thing. Even professionals feel this way.
- You do not need the perfect words. Being genuine matters more than being polished.
- Phrases like “I’m really sorry”, “That’s really hard”, or “I’m here with you” are safe and supportive.
- You do not need to explain everything or fix what has happened.

What this sounds like with kids

- “I don’t have all the answers, but I’m listening.”
- “It’s okay to feel upset, confused, or even angry.”
- “We can talk about this whenever you need.”
- Sometimes saying very little, and just sitting with your child, is enough.

Let your child lead the questions and the pace

- Children often process grief in small pieces.
- They may ask the same question again and again as they try to understand.
- Their questions might feel blunt or unexpected, but they are part of how kids make sense of loss.
- Not answering straight away is okay if you are honest about it.

Helpful responses

- “That’s a good question. What made you think about that?”
- “I need a moment to think about how to answer that.”
- “We don’t have to talk about everything today.”

Expect emotions to change over time

- Grief does not move in a straight line.
- Children may move between emotions like sadness, anger, denial, or acceptance.
- Some days they may seem unaffected, other days overwhelmed.
- These changes are a normal part of grieving.

For parents

- Try not to interpret emotional changes as behaviour problems.
- Respond with curiosity rather than correction.
- Naming emotions can help children feel understood, for example “It sounds like you’re feeling really angry today.”

Support without trying to take the pain away

- Grief cannot be fixed or rushed, even when it is hard to watch your child struggle.
- Your role is not to remove the emotion, but to walk alongside them.
- Sharing your own feelings gently can help normalise grief, as long as the focus stays on the child.

What helps

- Routine and familiarity during uncertain times.
- Small, practical acts of care.
- Reassurance that they are not doing grief wrong.

When extra or professional support might help

Everyone’s grief journey is different, and sometimes extra support can help. You may want to seek additional support if:

- Your child continues to struggle with everyday activities such as eating, sleeping, attending school, bedwetting, or engaging in usual routines for several weeks (often around 2 to 4 weeks, noting this varies for each child).
- Behaviour becomes concerning rather than simply emotional.
- There are ongoing safety concerns, such as talk of self-harm, persistent withdrawal, or risky behaviour.



Grief and loss resources for you and your community



30 min webinar: 4 ways to support kids and teens through grief



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