

SUPPORTING GRIEVING KIDS & YOUTH

Resources for Parents & Caregivers



HopeHouse 
COMMUNITY HOSPICE

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INTRODUCTION



GRIEF is defined as all the thoughts and feelings people have when they experience a loss. When someone is diagnosed with a life-limiting illness or has died, people of all ages can experience feelings of grief - including children and youth. In this document you will find information we hope will help you navigate grief with your child(ren).

The **Help Us Understand Grief (HUUG)** Program was first established at Hospice Mississauga in 2015 and provides 1:1 and group support for bereaved children and youth of all ages.

In this document, *child(ren)* refers to anyone under the age of 18.

Please note that some suggestions and information in this booklet have been amalgamated and adapted from several sources, including The Dougy Center (United States), Dr. Jay Children's Grief Center (formerly Toronto, ON), and The Children's Grief Centre (Calgary, AB).

PREPARING FOR A DEATH OR DISCLOSING A DEATH

While overwhelming, having conversations about death and dying with your child(ren) can help them feel more secure and encourages openness, honesty, and promotes healthy coping.

If you are anticipating a death in your life, or have just experienced a death and are unsure how to share this news with your child(ren), we have provided some suggestions below to help you navigate this topic.

Prepare Yourself

Ensure that you are as calm as possible by taking some deep breaths or having some water nearby. Sharing the news of an impending death or that a death has just occurred can be difficult and it is important that you look after yourself. If helpful, ask someone you are comfortable with to help you practice what you are going to say.

Create a Safe Environment

Share the information with your child(ren) in a place they feel most comfortable. We recognize that in certain circumstances this may not be possible, and that's okay. Consider other ways you can create emotional safety and comfort for them. Consider if they would like this conversation done in private, or if there is another adult the child(ren) trusts to be present that they would find supportive and comforting.

Use Simple Language

Adults often use euphemisms like “passed away” to describe death and dying. Children, especially young children, do not understand what this means. Therefore it is important to use the words “dying” or “died” and the name of the illness to help children understand.

Be Prepared for Mixed Emotions/Reactions

You may receive a variety of responses after delivering this information. Keep in mind that your child(ren)'s response depends on a variety of factors including their age, personality and other variables. Very young children may seem initially uninterested or not impacted by the weight of what you shared, while older children and teens may display more emotions. Remind your child(ren) that there is no right or wrong way to feel and that you are there to support them in whatever way they need.

SUGGESTED “SCRIPT”

If you are unsure of what language or wording to use to share the news of a death with your child(ren), we are here to help. Below are some suggestions on what language you might want to consider incorporating into your conversation.

These are only suggestions; keeping in mind your child's age and personality, make adjustments to these suggestions as needed. If you are speaking with children of varying ages, consider having separate conversations, or ensure the information is tailored to suit the needs of the youngest child, while checking in with the oldest.

Preparing for a Death

“I have some difficult news to share with you.

You may have noticed that (person's name) has been much sicker lately.

We have learned that (person's name) is not going to get better from their (sickness name).

Their (sickness name) is going to cause them to die.”

After a Death has Occurred

“I have some difficult news to share with you.

Remember how we talked about (person's name)'s (sickness name)?

Well, unfortunately, their (sickness name) caused them to die today.”

For very young children or children who have never experienced a death, double check that they know what “dying” or “died” means.

Consider exploring:

Do you know what it means when someone's body dies?

Dying is when a person's whole body stops working. When someone dies, they cannot hear, see or feel - they are no longer living like we are.

Remember, there may be questions your child(ren) has that you may not have answers to. It is okay to say, “I'm not quite sure” or “I don't know”. Remind your child(ren) that you are there to support them and that even though some of their questions don't have answers, you are there to listen and wonder with them.

AGES & STAGES

Use the information below to support your knowledge of how children and youth interpret and experience death and grief at different ages.

0-2 years

While babies and toddlers don't have the cognitive ability to understand fully, they experience death through their awareness of acute loss and separation. They may react to emotions and behaviours of significant people in their life, and disruptions to their routines and schedule. They may search for the deceased, feel anxiety due to the separation, or show signs of irritability or protest. You may notice an increase in crying or fussiness, changes in typical sleeping and eating habits, or temporary regression in developmental milestones.

HOW TO HELP

Use simple and clear language to address where the deceased has gone, avoiding euphemisms. Maintain consistent routines where possible and offer additional physical comfort and affection. Ensure their daycare, preschool, or other childcare provider is informed.



AGES CONTINUED...

If you are ever concerned for your child's mental health or safety, please call Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or your local crisis hotline.

2-4 years

Preschoolers often view death as reversible and impermanent. Your child will likely experience very intense (but brief) feelings more closely resembling abandonment as they are much more present-focused. They will be most aware of changes to daily care and routines. You may receive very repetitive questions, an increase in separation anxiety or dependency, changes in sleeping and eating habits, developmental regression (such as bed wetting) and general irritability or outbursts.

HOW TO HELP

Use simple and clear language to address where the deceased has gone and what has happened, providing simple and honest explanations and avoiding euphemisms. Maintain consistent routines where possible and offer additional physical comfort and affection. Provide outlets for emotional and physical expression, especially through play. Ensure their daycare, preschool, or other childcare provider is informed.

4-7 years

At this age, death may still be seen as reversible and impermanent. Due to magical thinking and sometimes misunderstanding of the cause of death, your child may experience feelings of guilt, wondering if their thoughts or actions caused the death. They may ask repetitive questions about the death or the deceased while also periodically act as if nothing has happened. You may notice general distress and confusion, separation anxiety or increased dependency, sleep disturbances, eating changes, and developmental regression. You may also notice an increase in acting out or violent play. They may also try to assume the responsibilities of the deceased.

HOW TO HELP

Provide simple and concrete explanations to answer questions and comments, while encouraging ongoing questions and conversation. Provide outlets for emotional and physical expression, especially through play. Ensure their school and classroom teacher(s) are aware.



AGES CONTINUED...

If you are ever concerned for your child's mental health or safety, please call Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or your local crisis hotline.

7-11 years

At this age, death can be seen as punishment, and they understand of finality of death. You may notice they ask specific questions, as they have higher informational needs and an increased desire for detail. They may have an increased focus on how others are grieving, and they may be curious about the "right" way to grieve. You may notice developmental regression, problems in school, emotional and social withdrawal, acting out, or changes in sleep and eating habits. They may experience an increased concern with the health and safety of themselves and others as well as an increase in thoughts and curiosity about death. Your child may also experience role confusion, and try to take on the roles and responsibilities of the person who died.

HOW TO HELP

Provide honest explanations and encourage questions. Model positive expression of feelings and encourage expression of a wide range of feelings through physical and creative outlets. Anticipate and support "grief bursts" (sudden upsurges of intense emotion). Explain options and allow for choices. Actively listen, show availability and allow alone time. Ensure school and classroom teacher(s) are aware.

11-18 years

Adolescents are beginning to fully develop a more adult-like understanding of death, and are working to make sense of the world and mortality. They may experience sadness, denial, and guilt and may mask their feelings. They may be more willing to talk to people outside of their family and may participate in more risk-taking behaviours. Some adolescents show signs of depression, including suicidal thoughts. Your child may also experience role confusion, and try to take on the roles and responsibilities of the person who died.

HOW TO HELP

Expect reliance on peers rather than family but remain open to questions and conversation. Maintain routines but offer choices where possible. Encourage self-expression. Actively listen, show availability and allow alone time. Ensure school and classroom teacher(s) or guidance counsellors are aware.



SUGGESTIONS FOR FUNERALS

Parents and caregivers often wonder if children should be included in funeral rituals or celebrations of life. If children receive age-appropriate preparation, these can be great opportunities for children and youth to receive emotional support from family and friends.

Begin by explaining to children that a funeral or celebration of life is a time where family and friends come together to share stories, photos, and videos about the person who died. Some people use this as a time to say goodbye to the deceased.

SOME THINGS TO PREPARE THEM FOR:

- Let them know they may see **adults crying** and reassure them that this is okay.
- If there is an **open casket**, explain that the deceased person's body will be inside.
 - You can share that their body will be in a special box, and they will look like they are sleeping. There may be flowers around the casket, photos or other special things.
 - If the child wants to touch the body, they can. Let them know their skin will feel cold to touch because the person's body is not alive anymore.
- If there is a **closed casket**, explain that the deceased person's body will be inside. They can go up to the casket if they wish.
- If the deceased will be **cremated** and an **urn** is present at the funeral, you can explain that the person was cremated.
 - You can share that cremation is when a person's body, after death, is placed in a very warm room. After some time in this special room, the body turns to ashes (like sand or dust). The ashes are placed in a special container that the family picks out, called an urn.



FUNERALS CONTINUED...

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUNERAL PREPARATION:

- Prepare them for possible **comments** from others, such as:
 - “I’m sorry.”, “Be strong.”
 - It is important that young kids know that people are not apologizing because they did something wrong, but because they are sad that this has happened. It is also important to reassure children that “strong” can look like many things – crying, laughing, playing, hugging, and that they can show their emotions in whatever way feels best for them.
- Explain **rules and expectations** for any ceremonies.
 - If children are expected to be quiet or seated for extended periods of time, let them know ahead of time.
 - Consider asking another trusted adult to help the children if they need to leave to take breaks.
- Funerals and celebrations of life can take a long time; remind them of things they can do to **occupy their time** and consider packing some quiet activities.
 - This can be things like simple arts and crafts, a deck of cards, their phone or tablet (with headphones), a book, etc.
 - Consider asking funeral staff ahead of time if there is a separate room or space the child(ren) can go if they need breaks or get bored.
- Consider bringing **comfort items** that may help them if they are experiencing big emotions.
 - This can be their favourite stuffed animal, or another special item from home that brings them comfort or reminds them of the deceased.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARTICIPATION:

There are many ways children and youth can participate in funeral rituals and ceremonies, including:

- Choosing photos and videos for slideshow or photo boards
- Helping to pick photo(s) for the funeral card
- Writing or saying a eulogy or speech
- Placing a special item in the casket like a letter, drawing, stuffed animal, etc

It is important to reassure your child that they can participate in the funeral as much or as little as they feel comfortable. Children and youth should not be forced to participate in things they are not comfortable with.

Using the considerations and suggestions above, consider creating a Funeral Day Plan with your child(ren) and share with other adults who will support them during the day.

GRIEF & SLEEP

A common struggle for grieving children are disruptions to sleep or other sleep disturbances. They may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, be sleeping in someone else's room, or having nightmares. While we want to encourage normal sleep routines and healthy sleep habits as much as possible, it is normal for these things to occur following a death. Bedtime is often when a lot of big emotions, questions, and worries come up and therefore a common time of stress.

Sleep Tips

- 01 If your child(ren) is having a lot of emotions or asking a lot of questions before bed, consider placing a “question jar” or “worry box” on their nightstand. Help them write down questions, thoughts, or worries, thank them for sharing, and let them know you can review them all in the morning.
- 02 If children are expressing worries about being separated from you or another person, consider using items of connection like matching stuffed animals to foster feelings of closeness.
- 03 Maintain consistent bedtime routines where possible, adding things that support and promote calmness like reading, listening to calming music, telling stories, meditation, etc.
- 04 Consider blocking out as much light as possible. Alternatively, if children are expressing fear of the dark, consider a night light.
- 05 If your child(ren) is having a hard time falling asleep, consider temporarily pushing their bedtime back so they will go to bed more tired and ready for sleep.



FEAR AFTER DEATH

New fears or worries are common following the death of an important person.

Children and teens often worry or have fears related to:

- Who will care for them after the death, especially if a parent or other primary caregiver has died.
- If someone else in their life will die.
- Where people go after they die.
- If they will die too.

Alternatively, some fears may develop specific to the circumstances related to the death such as if they will get sick or injured the way the person who died did, or experiencing new and uncomfortable feelings related to the place of death.



FEARS CONTINUED...

Suggestions to Cope with Fears

LABEL THE FEAR

Some kids may have a hard time explaining specifically what they're afraid of. If you have a sense that there is something specific that they're scared of, try to help them find the words. Sometimes labelling a fear helps to remove the power behind it.

VALIDATE & SUPPORT

Try not to dismiss their fears, despite natural instincts to do so, even if they are unlikely to occur. Instead, thank them for sharing openly and acknowledge that fears can be a normal part of grief. Ask them if there is anything they need that might lessen their fear and remind them it's okay if they aren't sure what they need. Sometimes the best antidote for fears is a listening ear.

OFFER INFORMATION

Some fears are rooted in a lack of knowledge. If a child's fear is stemming from not knowing something there *is* an answer to, consider sharing that information with them in an age-appropriate way. This can help to alleviate the fear.

ENCOURAGE INVESTIGATION

It can be helpful to try to find the information they are looking for, but some questions don't have answers. Encourage them to investigate and explore how this feels in their body, what helps make them feel better when they are scared, and what makes them feel worse. Encouraging exploration through play can be very helpful and therapeutic.

PROVIDE COMFORT

Ultimately, there are some fears or worries that do not have clear answers or some whose answers don't necessarily make us feel better. An important way you can help a child cope with fears after a death is by providing them with comfort. This can look like physical comfort – hugs, hand holding, rocking – or this can look like emotional comfort – quality time, conversation, establishing routines, offering choices.



OTHER RESOURCES



Click the links below to browse other resources to support grieving children and youth.

[Hope House Community Hospice](#)

[The Dougy Center](#)

[KidsGrief.ca](#)

[YouthGrief.ca](#)

[Canadian Alliance for Children's Grief - Directory of Support](#)

Workbook for Kids

[My Life, My Grief](#)

Books for Caregivers

- [Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children and Teenagers](#) by Ceilidh Eaton Russell
- A Parent's Guide to Managing Childhood Grief: 100 Activities for Coping, Comforting and Overcoming Sadness, Fear and Loss by Katie Lear
- Healing a Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers by Alan Wolfelt
- Healing a Teen's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers by Alan Wolfelt