

# HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF AND LOSS:

A Guide for Caregivers



**Child Life**  
mommy

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**Whether a child loses a parent, grandparent, sibling, relative, pet, or friend, it can be difficult to find the right words to use and things to do to support them.**

**As a parent or caregiver of a child who has experienced a death, you may find yourself wondering how you can help and where to even start the conversation.**

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

1. We all cope with death and loss differently, and grief is a natural response to these experiences.
2. For children, their ability to cope may depend on their age, personality, previous experiences with death, relationship to the person who has died, and the support they receive from others.

This guide will break down children's understanding of death by age and typical responses to death and suggest ways to help them cope.

# Infants & Toddlers



While children this age do not have an understanding of death, they do **sense and mimic feelings of sadness, anxiety, and distress of those around them.**

## Normal Responses:

- Crying more
- Looking for the person who has died
- Changes in sleep schedule
- Irritability
- Clinginess/wanting to be held more
- Developmental regression/pause
- Less active or responsive

## How to Help:

- Keep routines as much as possible
- Hold and comfort them
- Speak gently to them
- Be a calming presence
- Provide opportunities for play
- Be nurturing
- Provide comfort items



### Tip:

**Talking** about and **showing** emotions like sadness and worry can actually be helpful for young children. It can help children **put a name to the emotion** and show them **how to grieve appropriately.**

# Pre-Schoolers

3-5 yrs.

Children this age view death as **reversible** or **not permanent** and might believe the person can come back to life. They are also in a stage of **magical thinking** and may worry that they did something that made the person die.



## Normal Responses:

- Asking similar or the same questions over and over
- Looking for the person who has died
- Irritability and clinginess
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Developmental regression/pause
- Complaints about their body hurting
- Extreme highs and lows in behavior
- Fear of being abandoned
- Anxious behavior
- Withdrawal and quietness

## How to Help:

- Be concise in explanations and use clear language
- Keep routines as much as possible
- Reassure them that it was not their fault
- Be patient when they continue to ask the same questions or have the same conversations
- Allow them space to play and work through their emotions
- Provide opportunities for choice and control when appropriate

### Tip:



It might be helpful to explain that once someone dies, their **body stops working** and can no longer do things like breathe, eat, sleep, or move. This **clears up misconceptions** they may have about the person coming back to life.



# School-Agers



Children this age begin to understand that **death is permanent** and that the **body does not function** anymore when it dies. **Details** about the death might become important to the child as a way for them to work through it and **understand what happened**.

## Normal Responses:

- Will this bad thing happen again?
- Unable to focus
- Consuming thoughts and frequent nightmares
- Physical complaints (headaches, tummy aches, etc.)
- Feelings of embarrassment/feeling different from others
- Worrying about safety of themselves and others
- Through play, re-enacting the death and what happened
- Have a desire to take on adult responsibilities
- Emotions changing rapidly
- Withdrawal and quietness

## How to Help:

- Relay accurate and age-appropriate information and answer questions honestly
- Use art activities/play as an aid when talking to your child about how they are feeling
- Reassure them that they're safe and remind them of who's looking after them
- Offer choices when appropriate to enhance feelings of control
- Model and show the child that being upset or sad is okay
- Avoid expectations of adult behavior-let them be a kid
- Involve them in planning something to remember the loss

### Tip:

Children this age might be extremely **curious** about the details of death and ask questions that you simply **don't know the answer** to. It is okay to be **honest** and tell them that you don't have all the answers.



# Adolescents

13-18 yrs.

Teens understand that **death is permanent** and **happens to everyone**. They may seek support from people other than their family such as **friends** or **support groups**. Their thoughts about death take on a more **abstract**, adult-like form, and they may contemplate the **meaning of life** and what happens **after death**.

## Normal Responses:

- Social withdrawal and irritability
- Risky behaviors
- Unable to concentrate or strive for perfection and push too hard to succeed
- Sleeping disruptions
- Eating excessively/not eating
- Emotional highs and lows
- May not want to talk about death with those they trust
- Safety concerns for self and others
- Trying to take on caregiving role for other family members even when one is present
- Masking of feelings/acting like they don't care when they do
- Blaming themselves for the death

## How to Help:

- Encourage emotional expression and be willing to listen and validate feelings
- Give honest answers
- Avoid expectations of adult behavior and allow them to be teenagers
- Aid adolescents in finding a support group if necessary
- Talk to them about grief and death
- Be patient
- Seek professional help if you become concerned that your teen is having suicidal thoughts
- Allow them privacy if they want it




### Tip:

Teens might develop a sense of **role confusion** in the family after a death. Help them work through this by having **open conversations** about expectations in order to **avoid role-overload**.

# What Should I Say?

## Talking to Your Child About Death

- **Use words like "dead" or "died."** Be realistic when talking to your child about what has happened. Using euphemisms like "passed away" or "in a better place" can cause misconceptions and confusion.
- **Acknowledge their grief, and allow them to express their emotions and ask questions.** Validate their feelings and provide opportunities for play. Expect your child to have more questions about what has happened.
- **Tell your child what to expect.** Let the child know if there will be any changes to their day to day life. Talk to them about any funerals or rituals, and allow them to take part.
- **Tell the truth right away and use simple terms.** This gives an explanation about what they may see going on around them, and it also opens the door for conversation.
- **Deliver information in small doses.** Meet the child where they are. Only give as much information as they can handle at one time.
- **Help your child remember the person.** Encourage your child to recall happy memories. Do not avoid talking about the person who died.



## Remember, infants, children, and teens grieve and respond to death in many different ways. Try your best to:

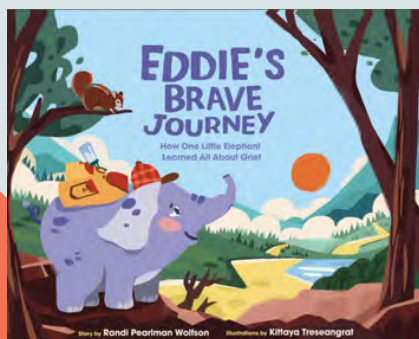
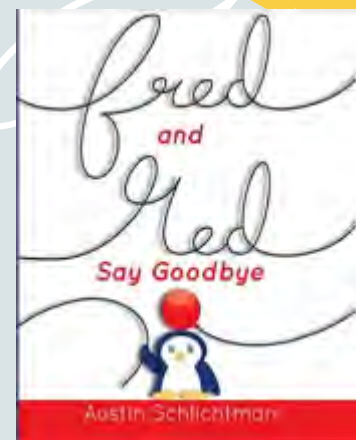
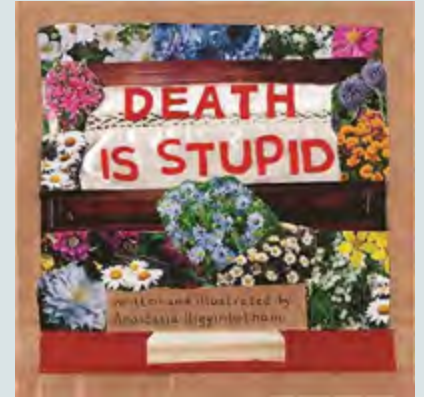
- Respond to your child's reactions in a supportive way. Give them extra time and attention. Listen to their concerns, speak kindly, and reassure them.
- Create opportunities for play, relaxation, and privacy.
- Provide outlets for them to express their emotions.
- Keep to regular routines and schedules as much as possible. You can also create new ones in new environments.
- Provide ongoing support as time goes on. Grief tends to resurface well after the death occurs, and children will have to reprocess that death as they move through different stages of development and as they develop as individuals.





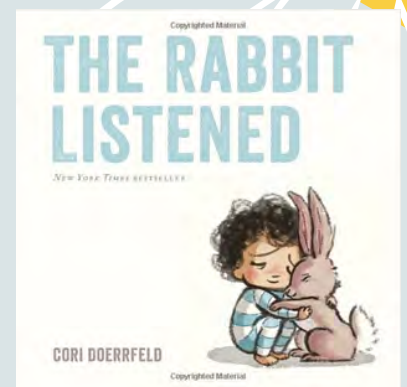
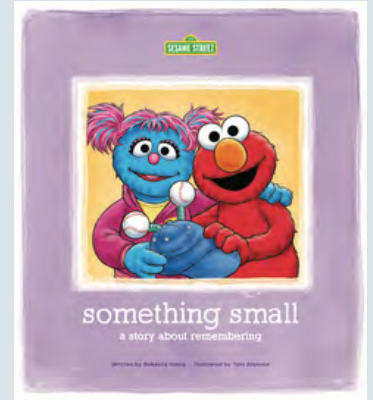
# Children's Books about Death and Grief

- **After a Suicide: An Activity Book for Grieving Kids** By The Dougy Center
- **Death is Stupid** By Anastasia Higginbotham
- **Eddie's Brave Journey** By Randi Pearlman Wolfson
- **Fire in My Heart Ice in My Veins** By Enid Samuel Traisman
- **Forever Connected** By Jessica Correnti
- **Forever Connected** By Caitlin Koch
- **Fred and Red Say Goodbye** By Austin Schlichtman
- **I Miss You: A First Look at Death** By Pat Thomas
- **Ida, Always** By Caron Levis
- **In My Heart: A Book of Feelings** By Jo Witek
- **Life is Like the Wind** By Shona Innes
- **Moving in Forever** By Rebecca Wu
- **My Yellow Balloon** By Tiffany Papageorge



# Children's Books about Death and Grief cont'd

- Someone Came Before You By Pat Schwiebert
- Something Small By Rebecca Honig
- Something Very Sad Happened By Bonnie Zucker
- Sun Kisses, Moon Hugs By Susan Schaefer Bernado and Courtenay Fletcher
- The Goodbye Book By Todd Parr
- The Heart and the Bottle By Oliver Jeffers
- The Invisible String By Patrice Karst
- The Memory Box By Joanna Rowland
- The Next Place By Warren Hanson
- The Rabbit Listened By Cori Doerrfeld
- We Were Gonna Have a Baby, But We Had an Angel Instead By Pat Schwiebert
- What Does Grief Feel Like? By Korie Leigh
- Why Do I Feel Sad? By Tracy Lambert-Prater



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