

# Understanding & Helping the Grieving Child

Safe Crossings Program  
*for Grieving Children at Providence Hospice of Seattle*

## Understanding and Helping the Grieving Child

When faced with the death of a loved one, it is natural for the entire family to experience a grief response. When you as a caregiver have a greater understanding of how children experience change and loss, it can assist you in helping your children through the normal and necessary process of adjusting and grieving.

While children are naturally strong and resilient, your intentional support is important in helping them establish a solid framework to make sense of difficult experiences now and throughout their lives.

We have created this booklet to explore the impact of a loved one's death on children in the family, including the unique grief responses that may occur throughout their grief process. Many of the insights have been provided by families and children who have walked this journey. We encourage you to consider the tools and conversation examples as a way of increasing your confidence and understanding in sharing difficult information as you strive to best support your children.

## General Factors

### Children grieve as part of a family.

As roles and responsibilities adjust to accommodate new needs in your family, your children may grieve not only their loved one who died, but also the many small and large changes that can follow. Such as:

- Changes in daily routine
- Decreased emotional availability of adult caregivers
- Increased individual responsibilities within the family
- Changes in who cares for the child or who spends time with the child

### Children re-grieve.

Caregivers often express surprise when their children shift from "being fine" to having difficulties in school or relationships as a result of the death. It may be helpful for you to know that children work through grief in cycles. As children develop, they understand and express the impact of a loved one's death in new ways. For example, a 7-year-old may again grieve a death that occurred at age 3 because they have reached a developmental stage where they can more fully comprehend the finality of death.

### Children are repetitive in their grief.

Children may ask the same questions repeatedly about the details of the death. This is a normal way children attempt to better understand what is happening in their lives. Responding to these questions with clear, consistent information enables them to process the information more fully and creates a sense of stability and trust. With a foundation of stability and trust, children are able to move through their grief in healthy ways.

### Young children are concrete thinkers.

You may find yourself wanting to use softer language to explain the death to children. However, we have learned that this can actually lead to more confusion. The best way to communicate with children about the death is through concrete, truthful language. For example, "We've been told by the doctor that your dad's cancer made it so his body stopped working. When a body stops working the person dies. It makes me very sad to tell you that your dad has died."

### Children have "magical thinking."

It is common for all children to think they have the power to make things happen in their lives. This can lead children to feel responsible for their loved one's death. It is important to explain to children that thoughts and feelings are not powerful enough to cause sickness, emphasizing that the death is no one's fault.

### Children worry about their own well-being.

It is developmentally normal for a child to be most concerned with their own security and well-being. When someone dies, especially if that person was a caregiver, children may worry about who will take care of them and if anyone else will die. They may worry that they will die too, particularly if the death was a sibling or another child. It can be important to tell children that most people live very long lives, that they are deeply loved, and that there will always be people to take care of them. Sometimes children want to know who would care for them if their surviving caregiver dies. If there is a plan, you can share that information with them.

## Children have regressive behaviors.

In the midst of this challenging time, children may revert to behaviors they have previously outgrown (i.e. bedwetting, thumb sucking, etc.). This is a common and normal expression of grief in children and youth of all age groups. They may benefit from individual attention and being comforted in a way that they were at an earlier age. For example, having a favorite bedtime story read, hugging a stuffed animal or one-on-one time with a caregiver may help.

## Talking to Children about Death

It is difficult to share with children that a loved one has died.

### It is normal to...

- Want to protect your children
- Worry about how they will be affected by your emotions
- Be concerned about the effect of the death on them
- Be unsure of their ability to understand what's happening
- Receive mixed advice from others

### However, without good information your children may...

- Intuit that something has changed
- Interpret body language, stress and tone of voice
- Become concerned or anxious
- Overhear confusing conversations
- Imagine a situation to be different than it actually is

### Helpful Suggestions:

**Anticipate the best time and setting** to initiate the conversation with your children. Be aware of any initial fears that may need to be addressed, such as relocation and changes in routine.

**Inform your children** that there is information about their loved one that you would like to talk about. This honors your child's importance in the family.

Example: "The doctor told us some information about your dad this is important for us to share with you."

**Allow some choice and control** about when and where your children would like to hear the information, such as at dinner, bedtime or in the car.

Example: Would you like for us to talk about it now, or would you prefer a different time?

### Tell the truth using simple, correct medical language.

Example: "This morning your father had a heart attack. A heart attack is when the heart stops working properly. Sometimes when a person has a heart attack it causes the rest of the body to stop working, and the body dies. I am very sad to tell you that your father's body stopped working this morning and he died."

If the information feels too difficult to share at this time, an example of being truthful would be, "It's too difficult for me to give you all of the information right now."

**Expressing your own emotions** can give your children the confidence to share their feelings.

Example: "The reason that I am crying is because this news makes me sad. It's okay for you to have feelings too."

**Invite your children to ask questions.** Provide honest, simple answers. If you don't know the answer, it is okay to say,

"That's a really good question, but I don't know the answer either. Would you like for me to try to find out some more information about that for you?"

**Reassure your children that their needs will continue to be met** by the people in their lives who love them. Your children may need specific details, including names of those who will help care for them, and should definitely be told if there will be significant changes in their routine.

Example: "Grandma will be staying with us to help me take care of you. She will drive you to school and soccer practice."

**Causation and contagion.** Explain to your children that no one caused the death, and if it is true, that they cannot catch the illness that caused the death.

Examples: "It's no one's fault." "There's nothing anyone did or said that could have caused your mom to die." "It is important to know that you cannot catch the type of illness your mother had."

**Keep your children's routines as normal and consistent as possible.** Acknowledge the impact and talk openly about any changes which will occur in their routine.

**If your children are school age,** it is important to consult with each child in your family about his or her wishes before sharing any private information with school staff or other families. It is not unusual for a child to desire that no one at school be told about the death. If the child is open to having this information shared, it can be helpful for them to work out a plan with their teacher about where they can go should they experience strong grief feelings in class and need space or someone to talk to.

### **Sadness...**

- Children need to know why you and others are sad.
- They must be told that it is the death that has made you sad. (Without an explanation, they may think your sadness is caused by something that they did or said.)
- Start by saying...*"A very, very sad thing has happened..."* or *"Mommy and Daddy are sad because..."*
- Acknowledging your feelings lets them know that it's okay to be sad.
- Tell them, *"This is how we feel when someone dies."*

### **What "dead" means...**

- Provide children basic information about the human body to assist their understanding of alive versus dead.
- Try to use language and ideas appropriate to the age of the child to communicate that a dead person's body won't do any of the things it used to do; it won't talk, walk, move, see, or hear, and the person won't be able to feel pain, sadness, anger or discomfort.
- Avoid the use of euphemisms such as "passed away," "left us," and "gone on." To a child, this may sound as if the person is taking a trip and can cause him/her to fear that others may not return from trips in the future.
- Refer back to these biological explanations when answering your child's questions that arise, such as:
  - ◆ When will she come back? (She cannot come back. Remember, mommy's body stopped working and died. When a person dies, their body does not ever start working again and they cannot go back to being alive with us. Mommy didn't leave, her body stopped working.)
  - ◆ Why doesn't she move? (She can't move because her body has stopped working.)
  - ◆ Why can't they fix him? (The doctors and nurses tried their very best, but once the body has stopped working, it can't start again.)
  - ◆ Is he sleeping? (No, when we sleep our body is still working.)
  - ◆ Can they hear me? (It can be helpful for children to voice their feelings as if their special person can hear them. Remind them that the body has stopped working, so their loved one cannot talk back.)

### **The cause of death...**

- Old age: "When a person gets very, very, old, his body wears out and stops working..."
- Terminal illness: "Because the disease couldn't be stopped, she got very, very sick and her body wore out and stopped working..."
- Accident: "A terrible thing happened (car accident, etc.), his body was badly hurt and couldn't be fixed. It stopped working..."
- Stillbirth: "Sometimes something causes a baby's body to stop working before it is born. We don't know why, but it is nothing anyone did or didn't do..."
- Suicide – Absolute (when there is no doubt the person killed themselves): "Your mommy's brain was not working properly and she could not see the choices she had to feel better. She caused her own body to stop working on purpose and died. Sometimes a person's body gets sick and doesn't work right, and sometimes a person's mind doesn't work right. When that happens, sometimes they can't see other ways to solve their problems and think the only option is to stop living." When talking to children about suicide, it can be helpful to compare suicide to a heart attack. "When a heart is not working properly you can die of a heart attack. People who choose to end their life have a kind of brain-attack".
- Suicide – Questionable: "Sometimes people take pills to relax or to sleep. Sometimes they forget how many pills they have taken and think that they need more. These pills make their body slow down, and too many of them make their body stop working. We don't think your daddy wanted to die, but that's what happened to his body."
- Homicide: "Your mom's body was hurt very badly by a killer, which made her body stop working. When a body stops working it means the body dies. I'm very sad to tell you that your mom died."
- Substance Related Death: "Sometimes people get sick with a disease called addiction. Addiction is when a person's mind isn't able to think clearly and they think they need to use substances (alcohol, drugs, pills) that are unsafe for their bodies. Sometimes these substances (alcohol, drugs, pills) can make bodies stop working and the person dies. Your dad took too many pills that were unsafe for his body. This made his body stop working."

## The funeral/memorial service...

If a service is planned in honor of your loved one, it is recommended to give your child the choice of attending, after a thorough discussion. Answering questions about the service may help them to feel welcome but some children will still choose not to attend.

- It is important to prepare them in advance by telling them where the service will be held, what they may see, who may attend, and what will happen at the service.

Example (change language to match the plans for their loved one's body):

"\_\_\_\_ will be taken from \_\_\_\_\_, where they died, to the funeral home. A \_\_\_\_\_ funeral home is a special place that takes care of a person's body after the person has died. At the funeral home, \_\_\_\_\_ will be dressed in clothes that they liked and put into a casket. A casket is a box we use when \_\_\_\_\_ is buried in the ground. Because \_\_\_\_\_'s body isn't working any more, it won't move or do any of the things it used to do. The body will look like \_\_\_\_\_. People will come and visit us and say they are sorry that \_\_\_\_\_ died."

- Provide information about who will attend, and what people might say or do at the service.
- Describe the room in the funeral home/chapel: color of carpet, music, flowers, paintings or religious symbols that may be present.
- Give details of what to expect if viewing the body in an open casket. (This is helpful for young children to grasp that the person is, in fact, dead.) Explain that the person will be lying down, not moving, and what they will be wearing. Explain any change in appearance due to illness, weight loss, or trauma. "It's still Grandpa's body but you know he was sick and lost a lot of weight so he will look thinner..."
- Identify a person for each of your children who can prioritize their needs throughout the service. This should not be a person who is acutely bereaved or who needs to be present during the service. Having a safe adult who can accompany your child, step out of the room with them, play with them and in other ways offer support before/during/after the service can be a significant comfort to them. Ask your child who they would like this person to be and explain why it cannot be you if that is the case.

**Burial...** (If applicable, add to the above information about the service.)

"Then we will go to the cemetery, where \_\_\_\_\_ will be buried in the ground in a spot that \_\_\_\_\_ picked out. If you like, you can come to the funeral home and visit for a while, and even go to the cemetery. You can bring something to leave with \_\_\_\_\_ if you would like. However, know that anything you put with \_\_\_\_\_'s body will stay in the casket when it is buried, and you won't get it back."

## Cremation...

- "\_\_\_\_\_'s body will be taken to a crematory, a special place where \_\_\_\_\_'s body will be turned into cremated remains."
- "When a body is buried in the ground, it breaks down after months and years and just the bones are left. In the same way that dinosaurs went extinct millions of years ago, and today we have dinosaur bones. Cremation makes this happen much, much faster."
- "Since \_\_\_\_\_'s body doesn't work anymore and doesn't feel anymore, \_\_\_\_\_ won't hurt when his/her/their body is cremated."
- "The cremated remains, which may look like coarse sand, fish bowl rocks or kitty litter, except it will be white because it is bone."
- "The cremated remains or ashes will be placed in a container called an urn (or cremation box, tray, other container)."
- "Then we will take those cremated remains and scatter them/keep them in an urn/etc."
- "The people doing the cremation take it very seriously and handle the body with a lot of respect. Just like you, they understand that \_\_\_\_\_ was a unique, special person who deserves to have their body handled with care and dignity."
- If the child is seeking more information:
- "In the crematory, it gets very hot and the heat burns away all the parts of the body except for some pieces of bone."
- "Cremation has been used for thousands of years. The ancient Greeks and Romans built funeral pyres, which were stacks of wood the body was put on top of. The wood was set on fire and the body burned. Funeral pyres are still used in India today."

## Children's Common Reactions to Death

Grief looks very different for each person. There are many variables which may affect a child's reactions including but not limited to: age, relationship to the person, reason for death, past losses, personality, cultural/religious background, etc. Sadness, anger, guilt, shame and responsibility are strongly felt emotions that often occur after the death of a loved one. Other typical reactions include: denying that the person is dead, not seeming to care at all, or romanticizing the death. *It is important to reassure children that there are no wrong feelings.*

**Sadness** may look different for each grieving person. Your child will feel supported by you as you share your own thoughts and feelings of sadness with him/her. Watch for some or all of the following signs of sadness in your child:

- confusion about what is happening
- withdrawal emotionally and/or socially
- refusing to discuss the death at all
- wanting to join the deceased (not the same as wanting to die)
- wanting to die or end their life (not uncommon in bereavement, however, important to take seriously and seek professional help)

**Anger** is common at the time of a death but can feel unexpected or confusing. Understanding it and anticipating it helps adults deal with both their own and their child's anger. Children may be angry with...

- ... *their parents*: for not telling them that the person who died was so sick, spending so much time with the sick person, just because they need someone safe with whom to be angry.
- ... *themselves*: for not intervening earlier, having wished that the person would die, not visiting or helping the dying person, not being a more perfect daughter/son/sister/brother/friend/ etc., not saying good-bye or "I love you."
- ... *their siblings*: for no apparent reason, grieving differently, not seeming to care/caring too much, not wanting to talk about the death/talking too much, telling people about the death, seeming more privileged.
- ... *doctors*: for not being able to cure or heal their loved one, not being available at time of death, for medical costs, for making a misdiagnosis or other error.
- ... *the person who died*: for not taking care of him/herself or putting him/herself in danger; leaving, dying, abandoning them, causing family upset, using up the family money before dying, not telling anyone they were sick, dying by suicide, not "fighting harder" to live, specific things they said or did in life, not having a closer or better relationship with them.
- ... *others*: for not taking care of the person who died, hurting or killing the person who died.

**Guilt** is another common and normal feeling at the time of a death. It's normal to feel guilt for large or small mistakes made while the person was alive; to have irrational guilt; and to feel guilt or blame in an attempt to make life feel less unpredictable and chaotic after a death. The thought that something could have changed the outcome may provide a sense of control in life or comfort that there is a rational order to life.

Children may express guilt over:

- *Feelings*: How can I be angry at the person who died? How can I be happy when they are dead? How come I am still so sad and not over their death by now?
- *Surviving*: How can I be alive when they are dead?
- *"Should haves"*: I should have visited before they died. I should have told them that I loved them. I should have been a better daughter/son/sibling.
- *"Shouldn't haves"*: I shouldn't have left the hospital. I shouldn't have said that hurtful thing. I shouldn't have let them drive the car. I shouldn't have fought with him/her so much.

**Responsibility** It is crucial that you help your child understand the cause of death and watch for signs that she/he is feeling responsible.

Children may feel responsible for a person's death for many reasons:

- They may have been told something that they misunderstood or took literally ("You're driving me crazy!" or "You'll be the death of me!")
- They may connect events that do not belong together. ("If I had sent a 'get well' card maybe she wouldn't have died.")
- They may engage in magical thinking ("If I wish hard enough, he'll come back." or "I got mad and wished that he would die, and he did!")
- They may feel that God has punished their bad behavior by causing the person's death or that if they had prayed harder the person would not have died.

## Supporting Children as They Grow and Change

As children grow and develop, the way they experience, understand and interact with the world around them changes as well. As you have probably experienced already, this journey also requires you to grow in understanding their needs.

With all of the challenges your family is already facing, this may feel somewhat overwhelming. You may find it difficult to distinguish whether your child's behavior is due to normal developmental changes or as a result of the impact of the death in your family. Both are probably true!

Below is a simple outline of behaviors to anticipate at the different stages of your child's development, considering the challenges children experience after the death of a loved one. We have also included suggestions intended to assist you as you support your children. Note that many of the characteristics described are often interchangeable between age groups, depending on each child's unique development.

### AGES NEWBORN - 2

#### Characteristics:

- Senses when the family routine is disrupted and is impacted by feelings such as sadness, anxiety, anger and other feelings
- Notices the presence of new people and the absence of significant people, including caregivers being gone at odd times
- Exhibit altered eating patterns, fussiness or disrupted sleep schedule

#### Ways to support:

- Watch your child to see if she/he starts acting differently and respond sensitively to their needs
- Keep a regular schedule
- Frequent holding and touch

## **AGES 2 - 4**

### **Characteristics:**

- Because language is not yet mastered, feelings are often demonstrated through behavior
- Grief responses are intense but brief
- Are highly aware of other's reactions
- Often regress in behavior and skills (bedwetting, thumb sucking, clinging, unable to pull on clothing)
- Struggle to understand concept that death is final

### **Ways to support:**

- Provide comfort and reassurance that they will be cared for. If there will be changes in who will provide care, share specific names and any other details
- Continue to meet basic needs, such as healthy meals and snacks, consistent bedtimes, and other activities related to maintaining a regular schedule
- Provide, clear, honest information with frequent repetition
- Touch

## **AGES 4 - 7**

### **Characteristics:**

- May act as though nothing has happened, grieving in spurts
- Are often concerned about how and why their loved one became sick, and ask repetitive questions about this. Great concern with process
- Exhibit regression in behavior and skills
- Violent play and increased aggression
- Nightmares, changes in appetite and sleep

### **Ways to support:**

- Provide clear, honest information regarding the death
- Provide consistent answers to questions using the same language when possible.
- Provide physical outlets for chaotic energy
- Encourage expressions of feelings (particularly anger)
- Offer opportunities for symbolic play, drawings and stories

## **AGES 7 – 11**

### **Characteristics:**

- Have morbid curiosity
- Desire for complete detail
- Wish to "fit in;" are more socially aware and concerned with how others are responding
- May desire privacy, and not want information shared, i.e., with friends and teachers
- Concerned with how they and others should be responding to death

### **Ways to support:**

- Encourage and validate healthy expression of feelings
- Engage in physical activities as an outlet for grief expression
- Be available, but also allow alone time
- Consult with them about what information they would like shared
- Talk about the person who died and their death
- Answer their questions fully
- Offer many opportunities for choice and control

## **AGES 12 - 18**

### **Characteristics:**

- Have a more complex understanding of death and loss
- Experience an emotional struggle between independence and dependence
- More likely to talk with someone outside the family
- May demonstrate grief through physical or behavioral expressions.

### **Ways to support:**

- Encourage and validate healthy expression of feelings
- Be available and listen with openness
- Do not try to take their grief away
- Recognize and affirm the need for time alone and with peers

## For Further Reading

You may borrow some of these resources by contacting Safe Crossings at (206) 749-7723, or look for them at your public library. Most are also for sale at online retailers such as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), unless otherwise noted.

### AGES 3 - 6

*The Goodbye Book ... by Todd Parr*

A moving and accessible story about saying goodbye through the lens of a pet fish who has lost his companion.

*The Color Monster: A pop-up book of feelings ... by Anna Llensa*

By illustrating such common emotions as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and calm, this book encourages young children to open up with parents, teachers, and daycare providers.

*Remembering Crystal... by Sebastian Loth*

A beautifully written and illustrated book that introduces a big subject to young children.

*When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death...*

*By Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown*

This book is helpful to have on hand to answer any questions children might have about death and the funeral/memorial or other service held afterward.

### AGES 6 - 12

*Grief Is A Mess... by Jackie Schuld*

An illustrated book for grieving children and adults who need a healthy dose of understanding, comfort, and laughter.

*My Many Colored Days ...*

*By Dr. Seuss, Paintings by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher*

Using a spectrum of vibrant colors and a menagerie of animals, this unique book provides a way for parents to talk with children about their feelings.

*Ida Always...by Caron Levis and Charles Santoso*

A beautiful, honest portrait of loss and deep friendship told through the story of two iconic polar bears.

*Anh's Anger... by Gail Silver*

A beautifully illustrated book that gives children and caregivers some concrete tools for dealing with anger and other difficult emotions.

*Wherever You Are My Love Will Find You ... by Nancy Tillman*

A picture book that expresses the depth of love and how it exists each and every day.

*Everett Anderson's Goodbye ... by Lucille Clifton*

A touching portrait of a little boy who is trying to come to grips with his father's death.

*The Invisible String... by Patrice Karst*

A story explaining that bonds exist no matter the circumstances.

*A Terrible Thing Happened ... by Margaret Holmes*

A simple story that normalizes feelings and provides coping strategies after a traumatic experience occurs.

### AGES 13-18

*Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas*

*By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

This book provides practical ideas to help support teens through their unique grief experience.

*Help for the Hard Times: Getting through Loss ... by Earl Hipp*

A guidebook that helps teens understand their experience with grief and loss. This book provides healthy coping strategies for teens to work through their grief.

*Tear Soup... by Pat Schwiedbert*

Affirms feelings and experiences of the bereaved. Winner of the 2001 Theologos Book Award.

*When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens ... by Marilyn E. Gootman Ed.D.*

This sensitive book answers questions grieving teens often have such as "How should I be acting?" and "Is it wrong to go to parties and have fun?"

*Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love ... by Earl A. Grollman*

Explains to adolescents what to expect when you lose someone you love.

*Modern Loss: Candid Conversation About Grief...*

*by Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner*

This book of personal essays written by grieving young adults covers many different experiences in grief.

*A Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teens and Friends ...*

*By Helen Fitzgerald*

A compassionate guide for adolescents struggling with loss and gives teens the tools they need to work through their pain and grief.

## **SUICIDE LOSS**

*Supporting Children After a Suicide Loss: A guide for Parents and Caregivers*

*By Sarah S. Montgomery, LCSW-C and Susan M. Coale, LCSW-C*

A well-researched, thoughtful guide for parents and caregivers who are supporting grieving children and families after a death by suicide. All profits go back to Chesapeake Life Center, a non-profit that supports grieving children and families.

*After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal*

*By Margo Requarth, M.A., M.F.T.*

A "how-to" guide for parent survivors: how to manage both the immediate and long-term implications of the suicide, how to talk to your children, how to see them through the heart-rending anguish to a place of acceptance, healing, and finally, a renewed and deepened capacity for joy.

*Voices of Strength: Sons and Daughters of Suicide Speak Out*

*By Judy Zionts Fox and Mia Roldan*

This book explores the emotional, psychological and physical effects of a parent's death by suicide, and shares what is helpful and unhelpful for suicide survivors.