



*Supporting  
Children's  
Grief*

# *What is Grief?*

Grief is a natural emotional, and physical reaction to loss. Grief does not just occur after a death, but rather as soon as death is likely, or after any type of loss. Losses can be defined as the absence of something meaningful to us.

The grief experience is different for every person and there is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve.

# *Common Grief Reactions*

The following are common emotional and physical reactions to grief for children and adults. Your child may show a mix of the options listed below, however, this is not an exhaustive list.

## **Emotional**

Sadness, anger, relief, confusion, sorrow, frustration, stress, guilt, regret, shock

## **Physical**

Trembling, nausea, trouble breathing, muscle weakness, trouble eating, trouble sleeping, crying, exhaustion, headaches, laughter

# *Death & Dying*

## **Children's Developmental Stages and Understanding of Death & Dying**

The next few pages will outline how children at different ages and levels of cognitive development will interpret death and some common grief reactions for the specific age group.

It is important to remember that every child is different in how they grieve. Due to their cognitive development, children often do not have the capability to stay upset for long periods at a time. It will be common to see children sad for smaller bursts of time, and then they can go back to playing and feeling happy.

# *Before Age 3*

**Children under the age of 3 are aware of an absence or change in their environment.**

By this age, children know who their caregivers are and are forming attachments. They would be aware if that adult doesn't return, or if there is a change in the caregiver's emotions such as crying, sleeping more, etc. Although they may not understand what death is, the child is able to understand that something has happened and change has occurred.

**There's a possibility that your child may regress and show more irritability.**

Your child could potentially regress in the areas of potty training, sleeping, or eating. This can be caused by the child noticing the changes of the caregivers, or caused by a disruption in their established routine with funeral arrangements, family visiting, etc. Your child may be more irritable or may need additional nurturing than before. These symptoms should subside with time and an established routine.

# *Ages 3-5*

**At this age, their understanding of death is that it is temporary and reversible.**

Children around the preschool age cannot comprehend the permanence of death, and therefore may believe that the person will wake up or come back to life. Due to this level of understanding, it is important to not use euphemisms such as telling them that, "Grandpa went to sleep" as that can cause more confusion.

**Children will often repeat the story of what happened to the person who died.**

The child may continue to ask the same questions many times, or repeat their story over and over again, even to strangers. This is how their brain is processing what has happened and this helps them gain an understanding of the events.

**Play is important.**

Providing lots of opportunities to play helps a child process and communicate their thoughts and emotions. This is one way to support your child in helping them understand death and dying.

# *Ages 6-8*

## **Death becomes more permanent.**

Around this age, children begin to understand the permanence of death. With this new understanding, children may become more fearful of death.

## **Children may feel that they are responsible for the death.**

Some children may have irrational thoughts such as thinking they somehow caused the death. An example may be, "I had a temper tantrum at the grocery store the day before my mom died; that must have killed her."

## **Children may feel like they are losing control over things in their life.**

Children begin to realize that bad things can happen to them, and to those around them. They realize things are sometimes out of their control and there is nothing they can do to prevent bad things from occurring. Offering choice is important to reestablish a sense of control. Offering simple choices like options for supper, or picking which pajamas to wear to bed can help children feel more in control.

# *Ages 9-12*

## **Their understanding of death becomes more concrete.**

Children begin to understand that bad things can happen to children, as well as adults. This can lead to the child becoming more anxious about death and asking more death specific questions.

## **They begin to rely on peers for support.**

Children may turn to their friends to discuss their thoughts or feelings about their grief instead of their parents. This is a natural occurrence for this age group on any topic as they become more independent.

## **Experiencing a death in their childhood can interfere with self-esteem and self-identity.**

These two traits are developing at this age and continue into the teenage years. A life-altering event can cause children to question their self-identity and can affect their self-esteem. With this age group especially, their peers may not have had any grief experience. This can potentially cause the child to hide their emotions so they don't stand out to others.



# Teenagers

**Peer relationships are important to teens.**

It is common for teens to seek support and comfort from their peers instead of their family members.

**Teens are more likely to express anger over any other age group.**

Expressing anger outwardly is more socially accepted in society than more vulnerable expressions such as crying in public. Although the teen is expressing anger, there are a lot of other emotions under the surface such as sadness, guilt, and stress.

**Teens may put a lot of energy into masking their grief**

Just because the teenager isn't outwardly discussing or expressing their grief, does not necessarily mean it doesn't exist. Teens do rely on their peers for emotional support and may be more comfortable sharing their grief emotions with them. Teens are also conscious of their social identity and some do not want to stick out as being "different" among their peers.

# Grief Support

## Ways to Support a Grieving Child

### ***Listen and provide a safe space to express all emotions***

- Allow children to express all big emotions; playfulness, sadness, anger
- Discussing grief emotions with your child can help them feel safe to share how they are feeling
- Listen without distractions

### ***Be honest and answer the tough questions***

- Children want to know the truth about what happened to the person who died
- Answer questions in a way that a child will understand
- Sometimes you won't have the answer to their questions and that's okay
- Death, dying and grief can leave us with unanswered questions

# *Grief Support*

## ***Avoid using euphemisms***

- Terms such as “passed away” or “went to sleep” leave children with unrealistic expectations and/or more confusion about death
- Children may become afraid to fall asleep
- Using terms such as “died” or “dead” are more helpful

## ***Give children choice and continue with routine***

- Offering simple choices such as what they want to eat, or what they want to wear to school, are helpful ways to give children control
- Children depend on adults to provide care and consistency
- Children depend on routines to feel safe and secure

# *Grief Support*

## ***Talk about and remember the person who died***

- Say the name of the person who died out loud
- Find ways to mention them in everyday life
- Discuss ways to honour the individual in a meaningful way to the child and family

## ***Play is critical for children's grief***

- Children process their emotions and thoughts through playing
- Encouraging children to play helps them emotionally and developmentally
- Play helps release any big emotions they have

## ***Be a model for the child***

- Children look for guidance from caregivers
- It's okay as a caregiver or an adult to show your grief emotions in front of the child
- If the caregivers are open to discussing their grief, children will become more open as well

# Grief Support

## ***Have patience***

- Some children will repeat the same story or ask the same questions many times; this is how they are processing
- Some children may show some regression in things such as sleeping, toileting, sucking their thumbs, etc.
- Some children may need more nurturing than usual

## ***Every child is different***

- Every child's grief will present differently, depending on age, development, and relationship with the person who died
- Children will talk when they are ready, if they want to talk about it
- Grief is a natural reaction to loss so allow space for it to occur in all areas of the child's life (home, school, daycare, extra-curricular activities, etc.)

# *Further Support*

## **When do children need further support?**

Although most reactions to grief are normal and do not need professional support, some children prefer to discuss their grief with someone outside of their family and peer group. There are professionals who support children's grief and can always be consulted if needed.

If the child is having thoughts of harming themselves or someone else, if they are having intense emotions that are interfering with their day-to-day functioning, or if they are experiencing intrusive flashbacks or thoughts that they find disturbing, it's important to consult a professional such as your family doctor, or a counselor.

# Death Dictionary

*Adapted by Liana Lowenstein, MSW*

**Dead:** When a person's body stops working and breathing

**Grief:** Feelings, thoughts, and reactions people have when someone dies

**Funeral:** A ceremony to honour and remember the person who died

**Funeral home:** The place where people go to attend a funeral

**Mortician/Funeral Director:** The person who prepares the body for the funeral

**Coffin/Casket:** A wooden or steel box that holds the body of the person who died

**Mausoleum:** A special building or tomb that holds the dead body

# Death Dictionary

*Adapted by Liana Lowenstein, MSW*

**Cremation:** When a dead body is burned in very high heat and turned to ashes. Since a dead body does not feel any pain, cremation does not hurt.

**Cemetery/Grave:** The place where dead bodies are buried

**Obituary:** An announcement in the newspaper/ online telling about a person's death

**Eulogy:** A speech made about the person who died to honour his or her life

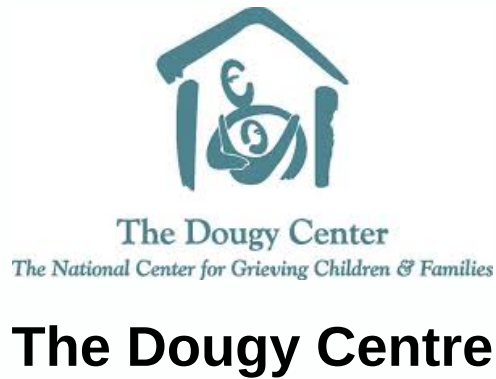
**Tombstone/Headstone:** A stone that is put on the grave where the dead body is buried. It usually has the person's name, year they were born, and year they died.

**Memory:** Something you remember about the person who died or something you did with them.

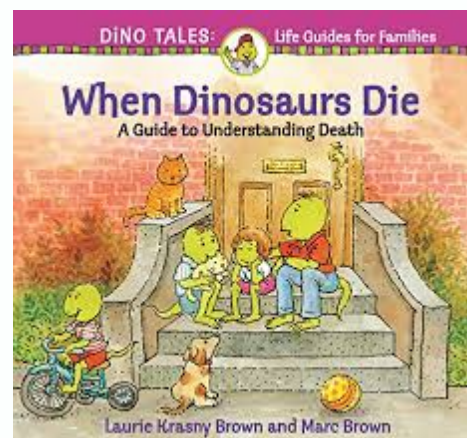
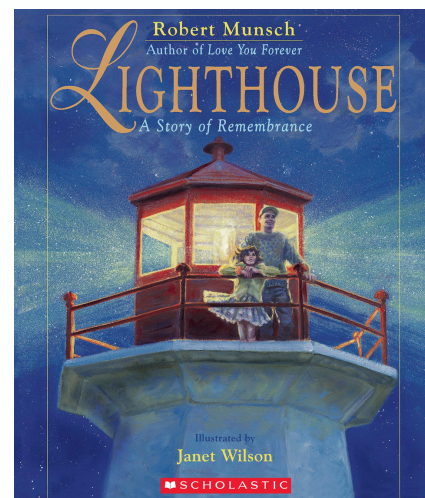
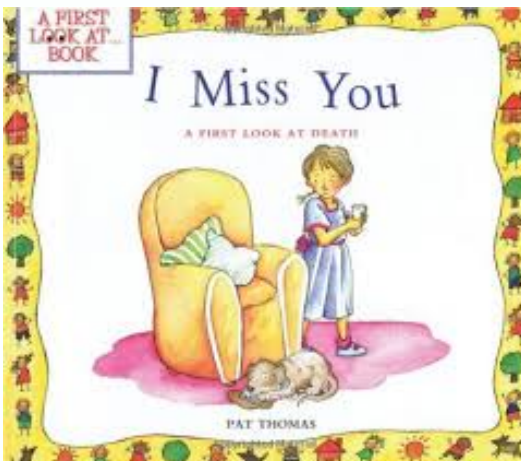
**Urn:** A container that holds the ashes of the person who died after the body has been cremated



# Resources



**Colchester East Hants  
Hospice Society**



*These titles, among others are available to borrow from the CEH Hospice office.*



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**Our office is located at:**

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