Supporting Children Through Grief

A Guide for Caregivers

As caregivers, one of the harder conversations we will have is talking to our children about grief following a death.

First, recognize that navigating loss is hard. We may be grieving, too. We won't always have the perfect words; we will make mistakes. What matters most is our presence and willingness to have open, caring conversations.

Some general ideas to remember:

- Children pay attention to what we say and how we say it: our tone, calmness, openness and trustworthiness matter. Calm body language, slower speech and open posture signal safety.
- Be honest — acknowledge that a person has died using straightforward language and validate that all feelings are OK. It's fine if we don't have all the answers in the moment; it is appropriate to say, "I don't know." We can normalize uncertainty.
- Give space for your child's questions and let them guide the conversation. We don't "fix" the grief; we walk alongside our children. Grief is experienced and expressed differently by each of us[1,4].
- Maintain routines; predictability helps kids feel safe.
- Make time to connect with your child at times when conversation can be causal, like on the drive home, at dinner or before bed.
- Over time, many families find that grief conversations bring closeness and resilience. Nationwide Children's Hospital frames this as part of how a family grieves together[2].

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Suggestions for the First Conversation After a Death

1. Opening: "I have something important and sad to tell you."
2. Report the fact: "Your classmate/friend/family member [Name] died."
3. Pause to check-in on their reaction.
4. Give a simple explanation (age-appropriate, see page 3).
5. Invite questions and reassure safety ("Grandpa was older and had cancer. You're not likely to get the kind of cancer that he had" or "Uncle Joe died in a car accident. Sometimes car accidents do happen, but most of the time, no one dies in them").
6. Listen, reflect and validate feelings - opening the door for caring conversations.
7. Brainstorm ideas for honoring the person and sharing memories.
8. Check again later — grief is ongoing.
9. Discuss next steps for support (professional, grief counseling, peer support, faith community).
10. Follow through — revisit, check in and adjust support as needed.

How to Have Conversations That Promote Healing, Safety and Support After a Loss

There are ways that caregivers can promote healing, safety and support for children.

1. **Acknowledge their feelings first.** Children feel safer and more confident expressing themselves when caregivers ensure they are heard.
   - "It looks like you're feeling upset/confused about what happened."
   - "It's normal to have questions and strong feelings after something like this."

2. **It's OK to establish priorities during difficult times.** Show them where you'd like the conversation to go without shutting them down.
   - "I don't know all the details. What matters to me most is that we take care of each other."
   - "I understand wanting to try and figure out why this happened; unfortunately, we can't always get answers. We can talk about our feelings, even the difficult ones, and that can help."

3. **Offer concrete action steps** since it can give children a place to put their energy.
   - "Let's talk about ways we can support each other right now."
   - "What helps you feel calmer when you're sad or confused?"
   - "Do you want to draw, write or share a good memory together?"

4. **Normalize not having all the answers;** It's OK to admit uncertainty.
   - "We may never know why. Sometimes that happens."
   - "While it is normal to ask these questions and wonder 'why?', we don't usually get clear answers.
   - "What we can do is focus on healing and supporting each other."

5. **Set boundaries around gossip.** If rumors or speculation grow, gently set limits.
   - "I know you're curious, but sharing rumors can hurt people and may not be true."
   - "Let's focus instead on what we're feeling and thinking about."

6. **Model calm and hopefulness.** Children take cues from adults. Speak slowly, stay calm and show openness. Suggest that it is okay to have heavy or uncomfortable feelings. End conversations with hope:
   - "Even though this is really difficult, there are people who care about you and who can help."
   - "Who feels safe to talk to when you're sad, mad, scared or confused?"

Age-Tailored Conversation Tips & Sample Phrases

Age	What to Expect; How to Respond	Sample Responses
Elementary school (approx. ages 5-10)	• Concrete thinkers may interpret things literally (e.g. saying a child has "gone to sleep" or "your friend is in a better place" can be misunderstood). • Younger children may see death as reversible; older elementary students will begin to understand the permanence. • Children may fear for their own safety or wonder, "Will this happen to me?" • Young children often have short attention spans; they may ask a question, move onto other topics, and then revisit the topic later.	• "I have some sad news. [Name] has died. That means their body stopped working, and we won't see them again." • "It's OK to feel [sad, mad, confused]. I feel that way, too." • If they ask, "Was it an accident / did they mean to do it?" - We can respond: "We are still learning all that. We don't have answers to all those questions yet." • If they ask, "Will I die too?" - Reassure: "It's normal after someone dies to worry about other people dying too. But your body is healthy, and I am here and will take care of you." • Invite questions: "What do you wonder? What do you think?" • Offer ritual, memory: "Do you want to draw a picture, write a letter or make something to remember them?" Consider sitting with your child while they do this.
Middle school (approx. ages 11-13)	• More abstract thinking: increased exploration of meaning, focus on fairness, feelings of guilt and blame. • May switch between being open with you and withdrawing. • May prefer conversations with peers and hesitate to open up to adults.	• "I know this is confusing. We may never have answers that feel complete. But I will tell you what I know, and I will be honest with you." • If they ask, "Could I have prevented it?" - Response: "It's very natural to wonder about that. There is nothing you did or didn't do that caused this." • "Tell me your thoughts. What do you feel? What questions do you have?" • "If you want, we can talk to a counselor together." • Offer a choice of ways to celebrate the life of the person who died (journaling, sharing memories, picture album, songwriting). • Remind them: "You don't have to carry this alone. I'm here. We can also talk to a counselor or another adult you feel comfortable with."

Age	What to Expect; How to Respond	Sample Responses
High school/ adolescents (approx. ages 14-18+)	• Can handle more depth; may ask complicated questions ("Why did this happen? How do I make meaning of this loss?"). • May struggle with anger, unfairness and injustice. • May compare their grief responses with others who are impacted by the loss ("Why are they so upset? I was a much closer friend. It seems like they don't even care and are just going back to life as usual as if nothing ever happened!") • Can be complicated by peer relationships and social media (rumors, misinformation).	• "What are you having a hard time with? What are you questioning? I'm open to hearing your perspective." • If they ask "Why them? Why now?" - Response: "I wish I knew. Sometimes there is no simple answer. What we know is that (name) was important to us and made a difference in our lives. We can hold onto that." • "It makes sense to feel [sadness, confusion, anger]. It's OK to feel it. I'm here with you. Let's find ways to channel it (writing, art, service)." • "If you ever feel overwhelmed, and you feel like you can't cope, please let me know immediately. I am here for you and we can get help whenever we need it." • Help them find meaning in the person's life, rather than focusing on their death: e.g., helping others, starting a memorial project, advocacy. • Encourage peer support or grief groups; validate that talking helps.

When the Death is Suspected to Be by Suicide

When a death is suspected to be by suicide, a child may have increased guilt, shame, shock and unanswered questions. The way we respond can help a child begin to manage the unexpected loss in a healthy way.

Guidance in having this conversation:

- Be direct and truthful in an age-appropriate way. Avoid lying or misrepresenting information; this can break trust and decrease emotional safety[8].
- Emphasize that suicide is not anyone's fault. Many children will ask, "Was it my fault? Could I have stopped it?" Be ready to repeat, "The death was not your fault, and it wasn't because of anything you did or didn't do."
- Remind children that it's OK and normal to ask/wonder why. Talk to them about how sometimes in these situations, we may never fully understand why it happened.
- Frame things in a way that young children can understand: "Sometimes a person's brain gets very sick, just like the body can. They may feel trapped and see no other way out."
- Avoid over-explanations or sharing rumors or unconfirmed information. Where facts are unknown, say so: "We are still learning more. I will share what I know when I can."
- Watch for complicated grief signs — intense shame, prolonged guilt, obsession with "what ifs," or thoughts of self-harm. Seek professionals who are trained in helping children cope with loss and navigate trauma.
- Use resources tailored to suicide loss if needed (see page 6). Key ideas include giving space, reminding them it's nobody's fault, modeling healthy talk about mental health, and connecting to others with similar loss[3,8].

Here are sample statements to help with this conversation:

- "We don't yet have all the pieces yet, but I promise to share as much as I can when I know."
- "I know it's common to think, 'What did I do?' or 'What could I have done differently?' But experts say no one causes someone else's decision to die by suicide."
- "If you ever feel too sad, lonely or pressured, you can come to me. We can also talk to someone who is trained to help us (therapist, counselor)."
- "You aren't alone. Many families face similar grief. There are support groups for suicide loss."

When to Consider Further Help/Warning Signs[7,12]

Even when grief runs its typical course, children may benefit from mental health treatment, regular check-ins with school counselors, peer groups, faith-based support and other community resources.

However, if your child's grief persists for weeks or months without meaningful improvement, you may consider additional help. Additional warnings signs include:

- Expressions of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts or self-harm.
- Problems with health, relationships, or everyday activities, including big changes in eating, sleeping, withdrawing from friends/family or academic decline.
- Showing signs of complicated grief, such as intense guilt or prolonged blame.

Pay extra attention to children who have already experienced a loss such as a death in the family, have previously been impacted by suicide, have their own mental health challenges or were close to the person who died[12].

National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text) 988
Available 24/7

Sources and More Information

- **Nationwide Children's Hospital:**
  - [1]Grief & Bereavement
  - [2]When a Family Grieves
- **The Kids Mental Health Foundation:**
  - [3]Helping a Child Who's Lost Someone to Suicide and Supporting Children through Loss and Change
  - [4]Processing Grief and Naming Emotions
  - [5]Building Connections with Kids, Starting Conversations and Keeping Conversations Going
  - [6]How Routines Help
  - [7]When to Worry about your Child's Mental Health
- [8]National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Guide for Parents & Caregivers on Suicide Death
- [9]Child Mind Institute: Helping Children Cope With Grief
- **The Dougy Center:**
  - [10]Talking with Children About Tragic Events
  - [11]Tips for Supporting Grieving Children
- [12]Centers for Disease Control: Guidance for Community Response to Suicide Clusters
- [13]OhioHealth Loss and Healing Services, Grief Booklet - Thoughts and Tips to Help You During Life's Hardest Moment
- [14]Speaking Grief
- [15]Learning Grief
- [16]National Alliance for Children's Grief

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Franklin County Suicide Prevention Coalition
Hosted by Mental Health America of Ohio

loss community services

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Ohio's Voice for Suicide Prevention
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