

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO HELPING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

Parents serve a very critical role when their child experiences grief and loss. The parent needs to be a strong role model, a permission giver, and a support figure. Honesty, love, patience, and understanding will help resolve the child's grief and instill a healthy perspective about death.

1. Questions about death should be answered simply and directly. Honesty is critical.
2. The death should be explained to the child to their level of understanding. Metaphors about plants or animals are most helpful for younger children.
3. Be sensitive to the differences between adults and children:
 - Children lack adult means for resolving conflict
 - Children have less opportunity to leave an unbearable situation
 - Children are more likely to rely on symbolism (drawing, writing, etc.) to describe their feelings of loss
4. Healthy ways of grieving should be modeled by the parent sharing some of their own feelings.
5. Give the child time and opportunity to talk about their feelings. Listen carefully, do not interrupt or censor. Be accepting and nonjudgmental.
6. Avoid euphemisms like "lost," "passed away," or making references to sleep or long journeys. These can be confusing to children and cause fear.
7. Create opportunities for the child to vent emotions, including anger, guilt, and despair. A child should not be discouraged from crying, nor should they be told to display unfelt or uncomfortable emotions.
8. Signs that a child may require professional help:
 - Denies or pretends that nothing happened
 - Dramatic decline in school performance
 - Develops phobias or unrealistic fears or has panic attacks
 - Engages in socially delinquent acts
 - Isolates self
 - Dramatic or prolonged changes in appetite, sleep patterns, or energy level
 - Uninterested in life
 - Threatens suicide

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