



# WAYS TO TALK TO CHILDREN

## Addressing Grief

Tips to Promote Child Well-Being and Resilience

### What is Grief?

Grief, the intense emotional reaction and distress in response to loss, usually associated with death. However, grief encompasses significantly more experiences than just death – separation or the ending of a close relationship, can also bring about elements of grief. A very natural process, and often a significant part of processing and moving beyond the pain and suffering to create new direction and a shift in daily life.

Grief, however, often brings about uncomfortable emotions which most of us find difficult to experience and express. And so the thought of having to explain grief to a child, can leave us feeling uncertain as to how to approach the subject and ways to do so in a sensitive manner so as to avoid causing unnecessary distress.

The younger the child, the more impermanent he/she may consider the loss. They may see it as a temporary measure – that it's reversible, just like the visuals of "coming back to life" they may see in cartoons and stories. This does not mean he/she is in denial, or not listening/paying attention, but rather that the abstract nature of death is too big and complicated to grasp.

**The American Psychological Association** defines **grief** as:

"the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person. Grief often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future."

And **bereavement** as:

"the condition of having lost a loved one to death. The bereaved person may experience emotional pain and distress and may or may not express this distress to others; individual grief and mourning responses vary."



**Remember, grief is not a linear process. Each person's process will look and feel different. It's important that your grief process is safe and prioritizes your wellbeing and that of those around you.**

### Factors Influencing Child's Understanding of Loss/Death/Grief:

- Age
- Developmental stage
- Gender
- Personality temperament
- Relationship to the person
- Family circumstance
- Support systems
- Earlier experience of loss/death
- Past trauma history
- Current stressors
- How those around them express grief
- Usual response to stress/emotions

# Parent Regulation Influences the Conversation

Any effort to assist your child, should always start with **addressing your own needs first and foremost**. Your wellbeing impacts your child and your mental and emotional state are often felt by those around you and can **impact the outcome of the interaction**.

Take a moment to **pause and reflect** – are you **coping**? What **self-care skills** are you using to ensure your own wellbeing? Are you relying on your **support system**? What other **help do you need**? Are you in a **regulated state**, as much as possible, to have a conversation with your child regarding the loss?

## Tips to Prepare for the Conversation

**Tell the truth.** Be honest, right away, in an age-appropriate manner.

**Use clear, direct, simple explanations.** This will help with understanding and processing.

**Be concrete.** This may include being prepared to use the words “dead” or “died”. This makes most of us feel uncomfortable, and as though it’s harsh, but using euphemisms are abstract concepts and often times difficult for younger children to understand.

If need be, **explain what death is**. “Dead means your body is done living. It doesn’t do the things it used to - it can’t talk, walk, breathe, eat, sleep, poop. Perhaps draw on personal experiences the child has had, to highlight this. “Remember when we saw the butterfly lying on the ground? It was dead. It couldn’t fly anymore. It’s body was done living.”

**Clarify misconceptions.** Avoid explanations such as “going to sleep” or “getting sick”. These are often created by euphemisms and can cause irrational fears.

**It’s okay not to know.** This can help to normalize the abstract nature of death.

**Discuss grief.** The emotions that it entails, the way it might feel in one’s body, how it impacts everyone differently. Encourage means of self-expression.

**Allow your child to grieve in his/her own way.** Whether this means they are a little quieter than usual, outspoken and wanting to discuss the death often, or seem completely unaffected by it. There is no “right” way to grieve – for adults and children.

**Cry together.** It’s okay to express your emotions. And it’s healthy to do so with your child when having the conversations. It will not worsen things – rather, it shows them a very real picture of what grief looks like. Suppressing feelings provides a rather disconnected view of what responding to grief looks like, and can create pressure for the child to respond similarly.

Should you choose to **involve your child in rituals, allow them choices that provide an element of control**. Perhaps that means choosing their outfit for the day, where they would like to sit/stand, a favourite photograph or song to dedicate, or if they wish to prepare a speech or read a passage.

**Prepare your child for what they may experience during a service/ritual.** The younger the child, the better it is to be as specific and concrete as possible. This may include details such as where they are going, who will be attending, what they will do for the duration of the time, some thoughts and feelings they may experience and what they may see.

**Rely on your support system** to provide additional care and support to your child, especially during moments of your own overwhelming grief such as a memorial service.

**Discuss overcoming “big events” in the future.** Children often become consumed by milestones such as birthdays and holidays. When it comes to loss, a child may become distraught that a person may not be present for that experience. Find ways to allow the child to feel connected to that person – perhaps by writing a letter, taking a photograph, performing a ritual to honor the individual.



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