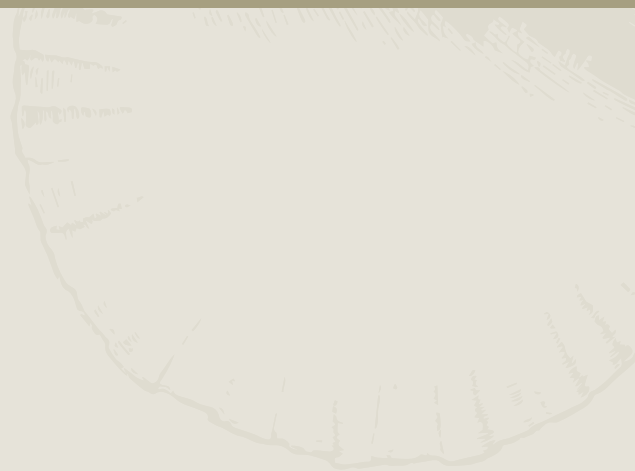




HELPING A CHILD COPE WITH GRIEF



Palliative Care Program
949-764-8096
hoag.org/comfort-care



Expressions of Grief

Talking with children about death must be geared to their developmental level and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of the adults around them. These reactions can actually shape how the child will respond to the tragedy. The range of emotions may include:

Emotional Shock and often and apparent lack of feelings. This can serve to help the child detach from the pain of the situation.

Regressive, or immature, behaviors such as difficulty separating from adult caregivers, needing to be rocked or held, wanting to sleep in a parent's bed or difficulty completing age appropriate tasks (i.e. bed wetting, language regression).

Acting out behavior that reflects the child's feelings of fear, anger or frustration. This behavior may allow the child to feel that they are exerting control over the situation.

Repeating the same questions over and over, often because the information is so hard to believe and accept.

Helping Children Cope with Death

Explain what "dead" means. Keep it as simple as possible. You can say "the body stopped working". Avoid saying the person "went to sleep" or "went away" as this may create fear about sleeping and/or hope that the person might return.

Tell the truth. Be honest and try to be specific; do not distort the truth. Honesty about an illness process can help calm the child's fears by reassuring them that a cold is different from cancer.

Allow children to tell their story and be a good listener. Tell the child that it is ok to cry or feel angry or sad.

Allow children to see you or other adults express emotions. Be aware of your own need to grieve and allow the children to see that the grief process affects you as well. This will help to normalize, tears, talking about feelings and expressing emotions.

Let children know that you really want to understand how they are feeling and what they need to get through the grieving process. Give them time and space to come to you with any thoughts/feelings/concerns.

Don't assume that a child understands information just based on his age; every child is different.

Give each child information about loss and death that is appropriate to their age and developmental level. Allow the child to ask questions to obtain further details as they desire rather than giving too much information initially.

Grieving is a process and will vary with each child. It is important to allow each child time to grieve in whatever way works best for that child. Pressure for the child to resume "normal" activities can prompt additional problems.

Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death.

There is no correct way to grieve. Grieving is hard work, understand that it is complicated and different for every person.

Engage long lasting support resources for children to lean on over time. Relatives and friends, bereavement groups where they can meet other children in similar circumstances, religious advisors or mental health professionals can be of help during this difficult time.

Should a Child Attend a Funeral?

Yes – if the child wants to and is old enough to understand the event.

Prepare the child and let them know what to expect.

Describe the environment (will the service be in a place of worship, or at graveside). If the body will be on view, explain that and allow the child to decide whether to approach the body.

Explain that you (or others) may be crying during the service. Let the child know that it is ok to cry and express feelings but also that it is ok if they don't cry.

Give the child a choice. Do not force a child to attend a memorial service. Make sure you try to understand what the concerns are so that you can help to address fears, questions or thoughts.

Memorial Ideas

Have the child write a letter to express feelings and thoughts to the person who has died. Tuck the letter into the casket or grave, or offer for the child to keep it.

Have younger children draw pictures to express their emotions.

Hold a special ceremony: say a prayer, light a candle, plant a tree or flowers.

Make a scrapbook or photo album for the child to keep.

Understanding of Illness	Possible reactions or behaviors	Helpful Parental Responses	Age Group
May perceive that adults are sad but have no understanding of the meaning of death.	Likely none. May change sleeping, eating, toileting habits. Will pick up on grief of adults around them.	Stick to usual routines and schedules. Stay physically close to help the child feel safe.	Infants and Toddlers
May see death as reversible. May have magical thinking about death and causes of death.	Picks up on non-verbal communication. May think that they can "wish" the person back". Usually functions well on a day to day basis.	Use age appropriate books to explain. Use simple terms to explain death, "Grandma's body doesn't work anymore". Make sure that the child knows that they did not cause the death. Allow child to ask questions before providing details related to the topic of death.	Preschoolers
Have some understanding that death is final and that certain situations can result in death. Death is perceived as something that happens to others.	May see death as a "monster" that takes someone away. Still some magical thinking but understands death is final. May over-generalize about death. May develop an interest in the causes of death.	May need more details about how the person died. Encourage child to ask questions and reassure them that you will be there for them.	Early Elementary School (5-9)
Cognitive understanding of death and the finality but not able to grasp all abstract concepts related to death/dying. May ask for more detail about what happened. Concerns about ritual, burial.	May experience variety of emotions including acting out & self injurious behaviors to express anger. May become irritable, sad, tearful, complain of headaches, stomachaches. May have separation anxiety. May have poor grades, poor concentration, withdrawal.	Use books to explain illness, treatment and potential outcomes. Reassure them that they did nothing to cause the illness. Take time to listen and let them know that their feelings are important. Let them know that it is ok to show emotions by showing yours. Let them know how they can help. Address issues of possible death even if child does not bring it up.	Middle School (10-13)
Able to fully grasp the meaning of death. May view death as inevitable. May question the meaning of life. Thinks like an adult.	May seek out friends and family for comfort. May feel guilt, anger or responsibility for the death. Unsure of how to handle emotions publicly or privately.	Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Teens may feel that it is easier to talk to friends or adults outside of the family. Guide through grief process and help identify coping skills. Provide privacy as needed but set appropriate limits. Provide plenty of verbal and physical expressions of love. Talk about role changes in the family if appropriate.	High School (14 - adulthood)

General Resources for Grieving Children

There are vast numbers of books and resources available to help children cope with loss. Individual leaflets, age-appropriate books and bereavement resources can be found in detail on these sites, with particular references to grief and how it differs at various ages and stages of development. You will also find further guides on the grieving process as it relates to different family members (i.e. parent, grandparent, sibling, etc).

DOUGY CENTER

www.dougy.org

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a loss can share their experiences.

They provide support and training locally, nationally and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief. They are supported solely through private support from individuals, foundations and companies. The Dougy Center does not charge a fee for its services.

NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN

www.childrengrieve.org

The National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG) is a nonprofit organization that raises awareness about the needs of children and teens who are grieving a death and provides education and resources for anyone who supports them. Through the collective voice of our members and partners NACG educates, advocates and raises awareness about childhood bereavement. The NACG is a nationwide network comprised of professionals, institutions, and volunteers who promote best practices, educational programming, and critical resources to facilitate the mental, emotional and physical health of grieving children and their families.

Local Grief Support Centers

NEW HOPE GRIEF SUPPORT COMMUNITY

562-429-0075

support@newhopegrief.org

New Hope Grief Support Community has been serving bereaved children and families in the Greater Long Beach area and surrounding communities since 2003. Their mission is to help bereaved children and families find hope and healing through connection and support. New Hope offers community-based programs led by people who genuinely care and have experienced a death themselves. New Hope provides peer support groups, family camps, community groups, and dinner parties and offer an opportunity to share experiences and feelings in a safe environment free of judgment.

OUR HOUSE GRIEF SUPPORT CENTER

www.ourhouse-grief.org

310-473-1511

Founded in 1993 and located in Los Angeles, OUR HOUSE provides grief support services, education, resources, and hope to adults, teens, and children. They provide in-house adult and children grief support groups, school-based grief support, professional grief trainings, on-site grief response and grief support tools and resources.

ART & CREATIVITY FOR HEALING

www.art4healing.org

949-367-1902

Art & Creativity for Healing Inc. (ACFH) supports emotional healing for children, families, individuals, and military personnel using our Art4Healing® method by assisting those suffering from the emotional support impacts of abuse, illness, grief, fear or stress. ACFH offers individual workshops and community programs offer expression, encouragement, clarity, and insight.

Support Groups

PATHWAYS VOLUNTEER HOSPICE

www.pathwayshospice.org

562-531-3031

Pathways Volunteer Hospice is a nonprofit organization based in Lakewood that provides a unique 8-week grief support group program called CHANGES, designed specifically for children, teens, their families and education professionals. Children meet in age-appropriate groups while their parent or caregiver meets concurrently on a week night through which they often find a common bond in their shared losses and discover practical tools and resources for dealing with their own grief while understanding and helping their children.

Bereavement Camps for Kids

CAMP ERIN

www.elunanetwork.org/camps-programs/camp-erin

Camp Erin, created and funded by Eluna, a nonprofit organization founded in 2000, is the largest nationwide network of free bereavement camps in the U.S. and Canada for children and teens ages 6-17 who have experienced the death of someone close to them.

It is a weekend-long experience filled with traditional, fun, camp activities combined with grief education and emotional support – facilitated by grief professionals and trained volunteers. At Camp Erin, children are comforted knowing that there are other children who understand exactly what they are feeling and experiencing. At Camp Erin, grieving children have an opportunity to address their feelings and memorialize their loved ones. They are provided with tools and resources for use during and after camps, including memories and friendships that last long after camp is complete.

COMFORT ZONE CAMP

www.comfortzonecamp.org/locations/california

Comfort Zone Camp is a nonprofit bereavement camp that transforms the lives of children who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling, or primary caregiver. The free camps include confidence building programs and age-based support groups that break the emotional isolation grief often brings. Comfort Zone Camps are offered to children 7-17, and are held year-round in California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Virginia.



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