



Parenting Your Other Children After Child-Loss

Finding Support

Grief: What is Typical for a Child

Talking with Your Child About Death

Adapted from resources provided by
[*The Children's Room Center for Grieving Children and Teenagers, Inc., Arlington, MA*](#)

When a child in the family dies, even if the death is not entirely unexpected, the entire family experiences a new sort of grief and loss. For many, this feeling settles over the entire family home like a cloud that shuts out the sun and makes things extremely challenging. As a parent whose child has died, you may find that you are so shaken by your grief that you do not know if and how you can manage the normal responsibilities of parenting your other children. You also don't know how you can help them with their own sadness and grief.

There is good news. First, research has shown that each of us has the capacity to heal. Secondly, getting support to help you and your family process your grief can be extremely helpful in the grief process.

Here are some things we hope you will find helpful.

Finding Support

Children are often reluctant to talk about or share their feelings of loss and sadness with their parents because they don't want to burden or sadden them further. But talking about the difficult feelings is one of the most helpful ways to process them. You help your child when you find them support.

You also help your child when you find support for yourself. It may be tempting to say you don't have time to seek such help for yourself – but it is very hard to take care of your children if you are not taking care of yourself. Finding support for yourself will help you support your children.

Support for you and your other children can come by:

- Speaking one-on-one work with a professional—such as a grief counselor, psychologist, clergy person.
- Participating regularly in a support group where people meet with others who have experienced a significant loss—parents with parents, children with other children. Children are typically grouped by age and their time together includes a combination of gentle sharing, play and art therapy depending on their development stages.

Whichever option you choose for yourself, you will be showing your children that it is OK to talk with others about your sadness and to ask for help. It is a healing gift you give them and yourself.

Grief: What is Typical for a Child? *(Material drawn from the website of The Children's Room in Arlington, MA and the Wendt Center for Loss and Healing and from the American Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry newsletter, July 2004.)*

As the parent of a child who has experienced the loss of a sibling, you will worry about how they are doing and wonder whether what they are doing, feeling, thinking is normal. Each person grieves and experiences sadness in their own way; and grief looks and lasts differently for each person. But there are some **common themes and experiences** that are helpful to know about:

Some common reactions children may have following the death of a loved one:

- Having head/stomach aches
- Telling the story of how the person died again and again
- Not being able to talk about the person or the death
- Feeling helpless and powerless
- Having trouble sleeping/being scared to go to sleep/wanting to sleep a lot
- Feeling sad and crying a lot
- Feeling guilty: "It was my fault," "I could have prevented this."
- Feeling angry, confused, frustrated, and/or quick to get into a fight
- Being afraid to be alone and not wanting to stay home alone
- Withdrawing from friends or not wanting to go out as much
- Dreaming about the death, having nightmares about the person and death details
- Wanting to be with the person who died
- Finding it difficult to concentrate on work or school
- Worrying about, "Who is going to die next?"

What does death mean to children?

Children typically understand death very differently from the way adults do. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible, a belief reinforced by cartoon and video game characters who die and come to life again. Children between five and nine or ten begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know. It is often not until children are nine or ten that they may be able to begin to comprehend that death is final, irreversible, and will happen to everyone. Regardless of their age, an important part of what can help a child understand what has happened is receiving direct, accurate, and age-appropriate information from parents or other caregivers.

Why won't they talk about it?

Children's grief shows up in a variety of ways. Many children are unable to just sit with their feelings, and may be very physically active in the way they grieve. This is totally normal! Young kids may not verbalize what's going on for them, and may attempt to continue "business as usual" or act like nothing unusual has happened. This may be a way of trying to keep overwhelming feelings of shock, confusion, and grief at bay. A grieving child may be less able to pay attention in school, and more likely to act out. It is crucial to understand these behavioral changes in the context of mourning – your child may not be being "bad," but grieving.

I never know how she's going to act.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely.

Why is he so angry?

The person who has died was essential to the stability of the child's world, and anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards the surviving family members.

Talking with your child about death (Material drawn from [The Children's Room Center for Grieving Children and Teenagers, Inc.](#), Arlington, MA)

Having had a loved one die may have been your child's first personal experience of the death of another person. As a parent or guardian, you may find yourself having to answer many difficult and painful questions, both about this specific death, and about death in general.

Children are curious, and will probably be trying to understand what has happened and what it means even as they are grieving. You may be unused to talking about death, particularly with your child. But death is an inescapable fact of life, and it is important that we let our kids know it's okay to talk about it.

By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know, and find out about any misconceptions, fears, or worries they may have. We can then help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talk by no means solves all problems, but without talk we are even more limited in our ability to help.

There are no right words to use when talking with your child about death; the tone and manner of the communication are the important things. As much as possible, children should be told about the death of their loved one in familiar surroundings, gently, and with love and affection.

Your child may have questions for you about what happened, what it means and what will happen to them. We encourage you to explain death in basic terms. Be honest and direct. Here are some ideas: "Died" means the person is not alive anymore. Their body has stopped working. "Died" means they cannot talk, breathe, walk, move, eat or do any of the things that they could when they were alive.

If you have religious beliefs that help explain what happens when somebody dies, you may wish to share them with your child. Remember that young children can be very literal, and that, despite our best intentions sometimes our words can be frightening or confusing. "If heaven is up in the sky," some children have wondered, "Why are we burying Aunt Suzie in the ground?" Or, "If I go up in an airplane, can I see my baby sister who's in heaven?" When unknowing adults say, "Your daddy is in heaven watching over you," they usually mean to be reassuring, but to a child, those words might suggest a spy who sees and knows everything that the child thinks and does.

On the other hand, you may not hold beliefs that offer any explanation or comfort in the face of death. The temptation may be to present a simple story in hopes of soothing your kids' fears. However, children often quickly detect inconsistency and dishonesty, however well-intended. Share honest religious convictions, but be prepared for further questions. It's often more helpful to answer a child's questions about death with, "No one knows for sure, but I believe..." Saying "I wonder about that, too," is also a way of keeping the communication open.

Finding ways to be with other parents who are also facing the unique challenges of raising grieving children can be a wonderful support.