

Grieving Children: What to Expect and What Helps

"Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve." – Alan Wolfelt

The quote above shows that children can also grieve or feel sadness after someone dies. When that happens, many children feel confused and overwhelmed. It's important to have honest communication. Share information in a way children can understand while they try to learn about what happened. Give children time and grace as you go through a painful experience together. Remember that everyone grieves in different ways, including children. Children's grief may look different than what you'd expect. This handout lists some common ways children grieve:

Emotions

- Confused (wondering what happened)
- Sad or missing the person who died
- Relieved, especially if their person was very sick or to have their grown-up's attention again
- Guilty (feeling like it's their fault)
- Love
- Angry, sometimes at their person for dying without understanding why
- Anxious (worried or afraid) that they or someone else they care about will die
- Lonely, especially if they aren't part of conversations and plans or if the person gave them social and emotional support
- Overwhelmed by emotions



Changes in Thoughts and Behaviors

- Not sharing their questions or feelings, especially if they are worried about their grown-ups
- Curious about death, dying and family beliefs, asking the same questions again and again
- A hard time focusing or becoming forgetful
- Thoughts that keep coming up about the death or about the person who died
- Going back in developmental growth (poor decision-making, temper tantrums, or clinginess)
- Themes of saying goodbye, death, dying and grief showing up in art, writing and dramatic play
- Telling and retelling what happened, especially in play or to new people
- The start or increase of nightmares
- Trouble with sleep: a hard time falling and staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Changes in appetite and eating habits

Spiritually

- Asking where the person who died is and why this happened
- Struggling to understand family beliefs in the context of this loss

Spiritual Care/ Social Work

4650 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027 | CHLA.org/URL

Approved by PFE 08/27/24

- Wanting to be with the person who died
- Having dreams about their person

Physically and Socially

- Going between emotional grief expressions and playfulness
- Crying more or less than expected or trying not to cry in front of others
- Physical symptoms like stomach aches, headaches or catching colds more often
- Changes in how they do in school
- Past coping skills no longer useful or accessible
- Less interest in social activities or pulling away from friends and family
- Having a hard time in relationships with teachers, guardians or other authority figures
- Peers bullying or saying hurtful things by mistake
- Having a harder time managing other changes in life (moving, changing schools, friendships)
- Making new friends and bonds with other grieving children
- Trying to take care of parents or siblings
- Wanting or not wanting to be alone

What Helps?

There are some things you and your child can do to help cope with grief.

- Talk to a trusted grown-up
- Go to a grief support group or camp for kids
- Learn about coping skills like deep breaths
- Share thoughts and feelings with a counselor, social worker or therapist
- Spend time playing and being with people who care about them
- Have a routine
- Share memories about the person
- Find a safe physical outlet, like exercise, sports, dance, screaming into or punching a pillow
- Read children's books about grief
- Make room for fun: laughter, watching familiar TV and movies, reading for fun
- Engage in art: drawing, painting, writing, listening to or making music
- Write a letter to the person who died
- Have grown-ups around who are modeling good coping skills and communication about grief
- When grown-ups take good care of their own grief so they can be present to the needs, questions and feelings of their children



For help understanding grief or to find support, email or call:

bereavement@chla.usc.edu | (323) 376-5083

Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and some evenings

Spiritual Care/ Social Work

4650 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027 | CHLA.org/URL

Approved by PFE 08/27/24