

## Signs of grief

Feeling sad about a person who died may last a long time. It is not strange for a child to grieve over a pet for two or three months or to talk about a grandparent's death years later. Children often grieve a little at a time. Their sadness comes and goes.

Some normal signs of children's grief include:

- Eating more or less than usual.
- Having nightmares or trouble sleeping.
- Clinging to parents.
- Avoiding friends or seeming withdrawn.
- Acting younger than their age (for example, sucking their thumb or wetting the bed).
- Acting out to get away from the pain.

When someone very close to a child dies, the child can feel as if he or she is different from other children. Grief groups allow children to meet others who also have lost a loved one. If you think a child is having a lot of trouble with a loved one's death, call the child's doctor.

## We can help

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin has programs to support adults and children through their grief journey. For information, call Bereavement Services at (414) 266-2995.

Remember, you cannot hide death from your children, but you can help them understand it. You cannot "fix" your children's sadness, but you can help them with their grief.

## Including children in funerals

Parents often wonder if they should include their children at funeral services. Most of the time, it helps children to be a part of the funeral. Allow them, but never force them, to be involved.

If children are going to a funeral, tell them what will happen ahead of time. Tell them who will be there and what the dead person will look like. You also should talk to them about how they may feel when things happen. For example, they may feel sad when the casket is being closed.

Let your children know it is OK to be sad. Make sure they know people grieve in different ways. For example, some people cry and some people tell stories about the person who died.

Think about your family's funeral plans. Should your children be involved in all or just a few of the activities? Can your children draw pictures or pick out something small to put in the casket?

In cases where parents are grieving or involved with the services, it can be helpful to have someone else who is close to the children watch over them.



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## Helping a child understand death

It is natural to want to protect children from pain, sadness and the death of a loved one. However, to grieve in a healthy way, children need to know that death is a normal part of life.

Here are some ways you can help prepare children for the death of someone close to them:

- Take advantage of time when the subject of death comes up. If a child sees a dead bird or hears a story about death, this might be a good time to talk about death. The child may be able to ask questions at a time when there are not as many feelings involved.
- Read children's books about the life cycle.
- Plant seeds and watch them grow.
- Help a child have a funeral for a pet.
- Discuss your family's beliefs about death.

### Memory making

Remembering loved ones and knowing they always will be a part of who we are is very important. To help adults and children remember a loved one:

- Tell stories about what the person used to do or say.
- Put together a photo album with pictures of the person.
- Plan events, such as celebrating the person's birthday, to remember him or her.

Children need to know they still can love someone, even after he or she is dead.

### Telling children about the death of a loved one

If someone close to a child dies, that news should come from a parent or another adult the child trusts.

Keep the following things in mind:

- Allow yourself time to get ready to tell the child. Do not be afraid to talk about your own feelings, but try to avoid losing control. Do not hide things from your child. Children seem to know when things are being hidden from them.
- Tell children it is OK to cry.
- Stay physically close to the child. Touch and hold him or her on your lap.
- Use the word "dead." Do not say the person has "gone to sleep." It may confuse and frighten the child.
- Be clear about what happens when a person dies. Let children know the body has stopped working.
- Know the child may feel angry, sad and afraid.
- Be true to your religion, but know children may not understand. For example, they may ask, "If heaven is up in the sky, why are they burying Grandma in the ground?" Be honest. You might say, "I wonder that, too."
- Never try to hide a death or the way the person died from children until they are older. They may feel left out or lied to.

### Understanding how children grieve

Children grieve differently than adults. The best way to understand children's pain is to listen to what they say. Do not think you already know what they think or feel.

Children often are very curious about death.

They tend to ask such questions as:

- Could this happen to me?
- Did I cause this to happen?
- What will happen to me now?

Be prepared to answer these questions honestly. Also, watch for signs that children have misunderstood what has happened. Children may think they caused the death or feel abandoned by the person who died. They may need to be told they are loved as much as the person who died.

Children may ask the same questions about death over and over. Also, children may "regrieve" the same death as they get older. For example, if a child's grandmother died when he or she was 2 years old, the child may bring it up again at age 4 or 5 and again at age 7 or 8. Each time he or she may ask new questions about the death. This is not strange or wrong.

Children show they are sad in a way that is natural for them. If they do not know how to talk about their feelings, they may draw pictures, write stories or act out scenes with dolls.

Do not be surprised by or try to stop a child from playing dead or pretending a stuffed toy is dead and having a "funeral" for it. These games help them understand death. Take these opportunities to listen to any fears the child might have.

It is easier for children to deal with grief when they feel safe. A normal routine and having someone they trust reassure them will help.

