

Helping Children *Through Grief*

After someone dies, children often carry questions and worries they don't say out loud. Here's what they may be wondering, and simple, honest ways to respond.

How understanding grows with age

Ages 2–5

May not understand that death is permanent; may ask the same questions again and again and act out death in play.

Ages 6–9

Often begin to understand death is final and happens to everyone; may want details and worry about others dying.

Ages 10–12

Understand death more fully; may want facts and may hide their feelings to protect the adults around them.

Teens

Understand much like adults; may lean on friends, pull away from family, or show grief as anger or risk-taking.

Every child is different. Kids often revisit a loss as they grow and understand it in new ways.

What they may be wondering

1

“Did I make this happen?”

Children sometimes connect a death to an angry thought, a wish, or an argument.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“Nothing you did, said, or thought made this happen.”

2

“Are you going to die too?”

A loss can make every other loved one feel fragile. Avoid promises you can't keep, and focus on right now.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“I'm healthy, and I plan to be here for a very long time. Lots of people love you and take care of you.”

3

“Who will take care of me?”

Even if they never say it, kids may worry about who will meet their needs. Name real people.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“Mom, Grandpa, and Aunt Kelly are all here for you. You can always come to us.”

4

“When are they coming back?”

Young children may not yet understand that death is permanent. Gentle phrases like “went to sleep” or “we lost them” can confuse or frighten them.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“They died. Their body stopped working, and they can't come back. That's why we feel so sad.”

5

“How did it happen?”

Kids usually do better with the truth, told simply. Share a little at a time and let their questions lead.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“They were very, very sick, and the doctors couldn't make their body work again.”

6

“Where are they now?”

Children may ask very direct questions. Share your family's beliefs, and know it's okay not to have every answer.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“Our family believes... What do you think about it?”



What they may be wondering, *continued*

7

“Is it okay that I'm laughing?”

Kids often move in and out of grief quickly, sad one minute and playing the next. Both are normal.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“It's okay to have fun. Laughing doesn't mean you don't miss them.”

8

“What if I forget them?”

Children may worry about losing the sound of a voice or a face. Help them hold onto memories in ways that fit them.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“Let's make a memory box with photos, drawings, and stories about them.”

9

“Do I have to talk about it?”

Some kids want to talk; others show feelings through play, art, or behavior. Leave the door open without pushing.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“You don't have to talk now. Whenever you want to, I'm here.”

10

“Why do I feel so mad?”

Grief doesn't always look like sadness. It can show up as anger, stomachaches, clinginess, or trouble sleeping.

YOU MIGHT SAY:

“Lots of feelings come with missing someone. All of them are okay.”

Ways to help

- **Use clear words.** Say “died” and “death,” and gently correct misunderstandings.
- **Expect repeat questions.** Answering again and again is part of how children make sense of loss.
- **Keep routines when you can.** Familiar meals, bedtimes, and school days help children feel safe.
- **Let them see you grieve.** Your tears show them feelings are safe to share. Take care of yourself, too.
- **Include them** in age-appropriate ways, like a memorial, a drawing, or a special ritual.
- **Let teachers and caregivers know** so they can offer support and understand changes in behavior.

When to reach out for more support

Grief takes time. Consider talking with a pediatrician or counselor if, for several weeks or more, a child:

- Struggles with sleep, eating, or school
- Withdraws from friends or activities they used to enjoy
- Seems stuck in intense sadness, fear, or anger
- Goes back to younger behaviors, like bedwetting

If a child talks about wanting to die or to be with the person who died, **get help right away**. Call or text **988**, or call 911 in an emergency.

You don't need perfect words. Being honest, patient, and present is what helps children most.

