

How to Support a Grieving Child or Young Person

Supporting a grieving child can be challenging, especially if you are also grieving. While we cannot shield young people from grief, we can help them through it.

QUICK FACTS

- Before age 5–6, children may not grasp the permanence of loss.
- Children move in and out of grief more quickly than adults; this is normal and protective.
- Children need time to process information. Lots of little conversations help more than one big talk.
- Children and young people feel various emotions when grieving, such as sadness, anger, anxiety, jealousy, confusion, or self-blame.
- Children and young people may experience grief physically: stomach aches, headaches, poor sleep, exhaustion, brain fog, or a racing heart.

Grieving children and young people need:

Safety & Connection

Grieving children and young people need to feel safe and connected. Safety comes from emotionally available adults, consistent routines, feeling understood, and having choice and agency. After a loss, children may lose more than the primary loss. Where possible, try to ensure they remain connected to existing communities, activities and routines.

Transparency

It's important to speak honestly with children and young people about death and grief. When information is withheld, their imaginations can fill the gaps, often with imagery more frightening than the truth. When sharing information with children and young people, try to have lots of smaller conversations, rather than one big one. Children need more time than adults to process new information.

Tips for speaking to children about death:

- Avoid confusing phrases like 'they passed' or 'they are leeping'.
- For young children, explain to them what dying means. A helpful way to do this is to refer to the life cycles of plants and animals.
- Use age-appropriate language and avoid unnecessary details.
- Explain to them what happens at a funeral or any ceremonies surrounding the death.
- Give them many opportunities to ask questions.

Sample responses to questions children may have:

What does die mean?

To die means to stop living. When someone dies, their body stops breathing, and their heart stops beating. They can no longer feel anything or move, and they do not need food or water. As much as we would love for them to be alive again, they will stay dead forever. Everything that lives will die, including all plants and animals.

Where are they now?

1) A general response adaptable to different cultures and religions.

Their body is [where it is now, and where it will stay]. In our family, we believe that [insert answer here] happens after we die. What do you believe?

2) A spiritual response adaptable to diverse belief systems.

Their body is [where it is now, and where it will stay]. Their soul is different from their body; their soul is who they are. You could imagine it like a bright light that lived in their chest. People believe different things about what happens to our soul when we die. In our family, we believe [insert answer here]. What do you believe?

Are you going to die?

Everyone will die one day, which means that one day, I will die too. But I want to live for a long time so I can care for you. I stay healthy by eating healthy food, exercising and seeing a doctor when I am unwell. If you ever feel worried about me dying, you can tell me, and we can talk about your worries together.

Permission to Feel

Let children and young people know that everyone grieves differently – there's no right or wrong way. Allow all emotions and behaviours, even challenging ones, to be expressed safely.

Things you could say to a grieving child:

- "It's okay to feel your feelings; it's normal to feel worried, sad, confused or angry."
- "You can ask me anything".
- "You don't have to talk if you don't want to; we can just be together right now".
- "This is not your fault; nothing you said or did made this happen".

Avoid platitudes like 'in a better place' or 'everything happens for a reason'; they can confuse and discourage grieving.

Navigating loss as a family

A village is essential during difficult times. Your village may include family, friends, neighbours, or local services. Asking for and accepting help can be hard, but it is vital for your family's health and well-being.

You don't need to completely hide your grief from your child; grieving together can be supportive. So that they don't worry about you, try to show them that you are being supported by your village, and that it's not their job to care for you.

Where possible, try to maintain family routines and rituals. Perhaps your family has cultural or religious practices you can engage with. Or you might consider introducing new rituals that allow you to honour your loss and grieve together. For example, you could light a candle each night or visit a special place on anniversaries or important dates.

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When grief doesn't ease

If you find that your grief remains persistent, overwhelming, and debilitating and is preventing you from living your life in the way you would like, it can be helpful to seek specialist grief support. You can start by speaking to your GP or exploring the supports listed below.

SUPPORT

- Grief and loss support can be accessed through SANE's RecoveryClub. To join RecoveryClub, register through the [SANE website](#).
- The grief and loss [space on the SANE forums](#) gives another safe opportunity to share, remember and find support with others navigating loss.
- Speak to your GP about accessing your local grief or bereavement service.

[National Association for Loss and Grief](#)

Access up to 12 free grief support sessions with a trained volunteer.

1300 474 33

[Red Nose](#)

Free support for anyone grieving the sudden loss of a child or young person.

1300 308 307

Suicide Bereavement

[StandBy](#)

Free grief support for those bereaved by suicide.

1300 727 247

[Thirrili](#)

Free grief support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders bereaved by suicide.

1800 805 801

Support for grieving children:

- [Kids Help Line](#) – 1800 55 1800
- [Canteen](#) – support and programs for children and young people (ages 12–25) impacted by cancer
- [Feel The Magic](#) – support and programs for grieving children and young people (ages 7–17)

RESOURCES

SANE Factsheets:

- Understanding Grief
- 5 Strategies for Navigating Life After Loss

Other resources:

- Free children's e-book, ['What Is Grief?'](#) – Palliative Care Tasmania
- Free resource for teens, ['Navigating Through Grief and Loss'](#) – Palliative Care Tasmania
- Free e-book for individuals and families, ['This is Grief'](#) – Palliative Care Tasmania
- [Books for children & young people on grief, death and dying](#) – CareSearch
- [Explaining death and dying to children](#) – Child Bereavement UK.
- [Explaining a funeral to a child](#) – Children Bereavement UK.
- [Explaining still birth or miscarriage to a child](#) – Children Bereavement UK
- [Supporting a bereaved autistic child](#) – Children Bereavement UK