

A GUIDE TO CHILDREN'S
**Grief, Loss
& Healing**

EveryStep 
Grief & Loss Services
Home of Amanda the Panda



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Developmental Responses to Grief

While everyone grieves differently, there are some behaviors and emotions commonly expressed by children depending on their developmental level. No matter how old a child is, it can be helpful to read through each of the age ranges, as there are times when a six year old asks a complex, big picture question and those when a teenager is struggling to find a physical outlet for their grief. We hope this information will help with understanding how grief affects children and teens across the developmental span.

AGES 2-4 YEARS OLD

Developmental Stage

Children this age don't fully understand that death is permanent and universal. They are most likely to express themselves through their behavior and play.

Concept of Death

Young children see death as reversible and are starting to wonder if death happens to everyone. You might hear questions like: "My mom died? When will she be home?" and "Will you die too? What about me?"

Common responses to grief

- General anxiety/ heightened separation anxiety
- Crying
- Denial
- Withdrawal
- Irregular sleep/fear of sleep
- Clinginess/ need to be held
- Irritability
- Temper tantrums
- Telling the story to anyone, including strangers
- Repetitive questions
- Behavior regression- may need help with tasks they've already learned

EXPECT: Withdrawal, denial, re-enactment play, heightened separation anxiety, whining, crying, clinging, tantrums, regression, and fear of sleep

Ways to help

- Assure adult protection and care
- Provide physical comforts: rest, holding, routine
- Create a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability, especially around starting and ending the day
- Provide a short, honest explanation of the death. "Mommy died, Her body stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost
- Explain physical reality of death
- Answer questions honestly
- Set limits but be flexible when needed
- Provide opportunities for play
- Give choices whenever possible. "Do you want hot or cold cereal?"
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance
- Give repeated concrete explanations
- Encourage teacher/parent communication
- Enrich "feeling" vocabulary

Developmental Stage

Children this age are exploring their independence and trying tasks on their own. They are very concrete thinkers, with a tendency towards magical/fantasy thoughts.

Concept of Death

In this age range, children often still see death as reversible. They can also feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die. They may say things like: "It's my fault. I was mad and wished she'd die."

Common responses to grief

- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits
- Repetitive questions - How? Why? Who else?
- Concerns about safety and abandonment
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Nightmares
- Regressive behaviors- may need help with tasks they've already learned (can't tie shoes, bedwetting)
- Behavior changes: high/low energy, kicking/hitting
- Physical Complaints: stomachaches, headaches, body pain
- Poor academic performance
- Peer problems

EXPECT: Poor academic performance, fantasy play, obsessive talking about incident, anxious arousal, behavioral changes, peer problems, psychosomatic complaints, attention seeking.

Ways to help

- Provide realistic information; address magical thinking
- Encourage appropriate acting out
- Continue to enrich feelings vocabulary
- Encourage verbal and creative expression
- Provide opportunities for age-appropriate tasks
- Provide opportunities for physical activity
- Explain the death honestly using concrete language. "Daddy's heart stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost
- Be prepared for repetitive questions
- Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play
- Allow children to talk about the experience and ask questions
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance
- Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or tomorrow morning?"
- Normalize feelings
- Reduce academic requirements
- Provide opportunities to help others in need

Developmental Stage

Elementary school age children may still be concrete thinkers, but are beginning to understand abstract ideas like death and grief. They often start making closer connections with friends and activities outside their home and family.

Concept of Death

Children this age begin to understand that death is permanent and start thinking about how the loss will affect them over the long-term. Some children will focus on the details of what happened to the body of the person who died. Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that their thoughts and actions made the death happen. They may say or think things like: "If I had done my homework, my teacher wouldn't have died." Or "I think it was my fault because I was mean to my brother."

Common responses to grief

- Express big energy through behavior sometimes seen as acting out
- Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others- "The world is no longer safe."
- Worries about something bad happening again
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Physical complaints: headaches, stomach aches, body pain
- Using play and talk to recreate the event
- Detailed questions about death and dying
- Wide range of emotions: rage, revenge, guilt, sadness, relief, and worry
- Hypervigilance/ increased sensitivity to noise, light, movement, and change
- Withdrawal from social situations
- Fear of repetition of event happening again

Ways to help

- Inform yourself about what happened. Answer questions clearly and accurately. Even though children this age are starting to grasp abstract thought, it's still helpful to use the words dead and died and avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost, expired
- Provide a variety of activities for expression: talk, art, physical activity, play, writing
- Help children identify people and activities that help them feel supported
- Maintain routines and limits, but be flexible when needed
- Give children choices whenever possible, "Would you rather set the table or put away the dishes after we eat?"
- Work to re-establish safety and predictability in daily life
- Model expressing emotions and taking care of yourself
- Be a good listener. Avoid giving advice (unless they ask for it), analyzing, or dismissing their experiences
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Normalize feelings and fears
- Reduce academic requirements
- Talk about relationship between acting out and traumatic event
- Provide opportunities to connect to larger community

Developmental Stage

Teens are cognitively able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death. They begin to see themselves as unique individuals, separate from their role in the family and may wrestle with identity and who they want to be in the world. There can be significant changes in their priorities, spirituality/faith, sexuality, and physical appearance. Teens often rely on peers and significant others outside the family for support.

Concept of Death

While teens understand death is permanent, they may have unspoken magical thoughts of the person being on a long trip, etc. They may also delve into questions about the meaning of life, death, and other traumatic events.

Common responses to grief

- Withdrawal from family or other support networks/focused on connections with peers
- Increased risk taking: drugs/alcohol, unsafe behaviors, reckless driving
- Inability to concentrate (school difficulties)/pushing themselves to succeed and be perfect
- Difficulty sleeping, exhaustion
- Lack of appetite/eating too much
- Unpredictable and at times intense emotional reactions: anger, sadness, guilt, relief, anxiety
- Uncomfortable discussing the death or their experiences with parents and caregivers
- Worry about safety of self and others
- Fear about death or violence happening again
- Confusion over role identity in the family
- Attempts to take on caregiving/parent role with younger siblings and other adults
- May have thoughts of suicide and self-harm
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, movement, light

Ways to help

- Reinforce assurances of safety and security, even if teens don't express concerns
- Maintain routines and set clear expectations, but be flexible when needed
- Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix, or take them away
- Answer questions honestly
- Provide choices whenever possible. "I'd like to do something to honor your dad's birthday, would you like to be part of that? What ideas do you have?"
- Adjust expectations for concentration and task completion when necessary
- Assist teens to connect with support systems, including other adults (family, family friends, teachers, coaches)
- Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of yourself.
- Ask open ended questions ("What is it like for you?") and listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or placating
- Have patience with teens' wide range of reactions and questions.
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Encourage physical activity
- Normalize feelings and fears
- Encourage group discussion
- Reduce academic requirements
- Resume routine activities when possible
- Talk about relationship between acting out and the traumatic event
- Discuss safety measures
- Provide opportunities to connect to larger community

EXPECT: Acting out, self-criticism, fear of repetition of event/happening again, displaced anger, guilt, and withdrawal

What Children, Adults, and Teachers Need to Know About Grief

What Children Need to Know...

- They are not alone.
- It's okay to ask for help.
- Their world has been completely changed and will never go back to the way it was.
- It's normal to be afraid, to cry, to feel lonely and to be angry.
- It's okay if a caretaker cries when being asked questions.
- It's okay to feel that life is unfair.
- They can trust the adults around them.
- Grief is a family matter.
- They are loved just as much as before the death.

What Adults Need to Know...

- You don't need to have all the answers.
- You can't "fix it" and make it all better.
- You can ask for help – from adults and children.
- Children will grieve, play, ask questions, and grieve again in short spaces – be ready to respond when they're ready to share!
- Children are not just small adults.
- Crying and questioning are healthy for all ages.
- Children/teens need to be with friends, to attend school and be active.
- Children need reassurance that they did not cause the death.
- Children, teens and young adults need affirmation and support from adults.

What Teachers Need to Know (Possible School Reactions)...

- Become the class clown - Become withdrawn and unsociable
- Become restless in staying seated - Not complete homework - Become overly talkative
- Have problems listening, staying on task - Become disorganized - Show reckless physical action
- Show poor concentration around external stimuli- Show difficulty in following directions
- Teachers can mistake a student's healthy expression of grief- talking, crying, etc. as "having problems with a loss", when this is normal for up to 2 years after a loss. Grief is not something that ends in a few weeks or months
- Teachers can mistake a student's lack of open expressions of grief as "not really having any problems with the loss." Children learn to hide grief so they don't stand out as weird or different at school. They also censor around adults to avoid upsetting them

aining Death

Andrea Warnick RN, MA and
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The death of a loved one is a life-changing experience. As adults, we have a lifetime's worth of experience handling grief, disappointment, and all of life's curveballs. Children, however, are mostly inexperienced when it comes to handling difficult situations and emotions – especially the reality of a loved one's death and the concept of a death as a whole.

Without guidance from an understanding adult, death can be confusing, overwhelming, and even a terrifying concept for a child. It falls to us parents, grandparents, guardians, and other significant adults/caretakers to understand how to best explain death to children in order to provide them with a solid foundation wherein a healthy understanding of the death and dying process can be formed.

Parents want to protect their children from emotional pain and suffering. This natural parental instinct can be difficult to balance with the desire to be honest and upfront about harsh realities; such as talking about death and dying. As a therapist who specializes in working with grieving children, one of the most frequent questions I'm asked is: "When is the right time to tell the kids that a family member will likely die from this illness?" While there is no "right time" that works for every family, there is one certainty: children of all ages benefit from being prepared in advance for the death of someone close to them.

Why is Explaining Death to Children So Difficult?

Many adults feel a great deal of anxiety when they think about having to one day explain the concept of death to a child. Why, though, do adults feel uneasy when we think about discussing death with our children?

1. We're afraid that we might not have all of the answers.

As parents we aim to provide our children with security and instill within them the knowledge that we will always be there to care for them. When confronted with the subject matter of death, however, we often find ourselves worrying whether or not we'll be able to provide our children with an answer that offers peace and assurance.

You may not have all of the answers to all of your child's questions, and that's okay! You can be assured, however, that you will provide them a comforting, loving presence and be a bastion of security and certainty for them during this difficult period.

2. It can be difficult to talk to children — especially younger children.

When talking about a matter as complex as death, it can be difficult to know that we're being heard by the child, and equally difficult to understand a child's questions and responses.

Adhering to honest, short answers throughout your explanation, as well as in your responses to questions can help simplify matters for the child and ensure they gain an understanding of the concept and permanence of death. When dealing with younger children, it can be especially prudent to favor explanations of death as the inability to perform life functions-like breathing, eating, and moving.

3. We're afraid that we won't be able to adequately comfort them or provide them the help that they need.

After receiving the news of a loved one's death and when beginning to understand the realities of death, children can display a wide range of reactions — with

some emotions seeming numb and disconnected, while other children can display large outbursts of emotion.

Understand that, during this time, your child needs to feel whatever they feel. Regardless of their initial reaction to the concepts of death, you will be able to be their comforter and stable foundation during this difficult period.

4. We may be dealing with our own grief at the time.

We may be coping with our own grief around the same time we're attempting to explain death to our children. When coping with grief, many shy away from potentially showing sadness and emotional vulnerability in front of their children, for fear of showing weakness or making the children feel afraid or insecure.

Know that it's okay to be processing your grief at this time, and it's important for your child to see that you're processing your emotions and sharing them honestly — not bottling them up and ignoring them. Letting your child see you work through your emotions will let them know that it's okay to feel sad, angry, or feel any other emotion that may come as a result of a loved one's death.

5. Death is often a taboo topic.

Death and the dying process are topics that we heavily avoid as a society. Death was once regarded as a normal part of family life, with deaths most often occurring at home and among family. Now, the dying are very much a separate body from mainstream society; as such, we're now uneasy in even mentioning the word "death" in conversation, defaulting to more comfortable euphemisms such as "lost," or "passed away."

Regardless of social taboos, it's best to promote honesty and reality when explaining death to your child. Using gentler euphemisms to describe death, while well-intentioned, often confuse children. Your dedication to communicating openly and honestly with your children about death will serve them well as they begin to formulate their understanding and relationship with the concepts of death and dying.

When Is the Best Time to Talk to a Child about Death?

Many of us may consider keeping painful truths, such as the death of a loved one, hidden from children in an effort to protect them. In practice, however, this only serves to prolong a period of uncertainty and anxiety in children, who have a keen ability to pick up on subtle emotional changes in adults and in the home.

Though the desire to shield your child from the painful news of a death is grounded in good intentions, to prevent unnecessary anxiety and emotional anguish in your child, the sooner you are able to have the conversation about death with your child, the better.

Determining timing

Even when caregivers are convinced they need to be honest about an impending death, deciding when to share this heartbreaking news with children can be a daunting task. Some times are certainly better than others for telling children (dropping them off at school is definitely not a good time). For most families, the "right time" will always be hard to determine. It rarely feels "right" to share such information, especially in the case of a dying parent or sibling. The task is always difficult emotionally and often feels opposite to what parents think they should do.

But there are some strategies families can use to help them decide when to share this information. These include:

- Ask children to describe what they already know about the situation. Many caregivers are surprised to learn that some children have already considered the likelihood of the loved one dying.
- Reassure children that talking about the likelihood of death does not increase the chances of the death occurring. Children often engage in "magical thinking." This can make them feel responsible for good and bad outcomes, despite not actually having any control over them. Providing children with facts and concrete explanations can help them focus on things that are actually within their control (such as how to spend time with their family member). Knowing what to expect can help them let go of things beyond their control (such as worrying about when the person will die).

- Ask children how much information they want. Do they want a lot of information or just a summary of the most important information? Some children need more information than other children and benefit from being told about the prognosis as soon as possible. It's also important to let children know that they can change their minds later on if they would like more or less information.
- Create an environment where children feel safe asking questions. Adults can invite children to ask any questions they have about the illness, even the hard questions. Children may ask: "Could Dad die from his cancer?" It's important to answer such questions honestly. Keep in mind it can be a relief for children to hear that adults may not have all the answers to their questions. Adults can provide reassurance that even though they do not have all the answers it is still important to talk and wonder about these hard things together.
- Recognize that it's unnecessary to hold off telling children until "all of the medical information" is obtained. Many families think they shouldn't talk to children until they have more information (more test results, a more accurate prognosis). But children and youth can appreciate being a part of the experience of uncertainty with the adults in their life.
- Ask the physician directly for an estimation as to how long the person will live. If the death may be imminent, it's important to share that information with children right away

Some families are open with their children about the likelihood of death from the time of diagnosis. This is an approach that works well for many children. Phyllis Silverman is Project Director of the Harvard/MGH Child Bereavement Study and author of *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives*. She writes:

[t]elling them the truth from the beginning sets the stage for an openness that needs to be there throughout the illness and afterward. When they are involved in this way, they will always be certain that they are part of the family. They will know that there are no family secrets that isolate them from each other and that do not honor what they see, what they know, and what they feel. (p. 80)

Many families are pleasantly surprised to find that children tend to resume their regular activities and interests quite quickly after learning a parent or sibling may die. Children possess a remarkable ability to balance deep joy and deep sorrow. As well, parents often feel greatly relieved once this information is out in the open. They no longer need to spend energy on trying to control the flow of information.

Yet knowing someone will die and actually experiencing the death can be two very different things. Children and youth may still be shocked or surprised when a family member dies, even if they've been well prepared beforehand.

How to Prepare for the Conversation

1. Understand what your child will be able to comprehend about death at their age.

By understanding what your child will be able to grasp before you have the conversation, you can structure your explanation to fit their ability to comprehend the information.

- Infants can grasp that the adults in their life are sad or angry, but cannot understand the concept of death.
- Preschoolers may see death as a reversible, non-permanent event and may invent magical theories as to what causes death and what is related to the dying process.
- Elementary School-aged children understand the permanence of death and understand the correlation of events that lead to someone's dying; however, death is often perceived as an event that solely happens to other people.
- Middle School-aged children have a full understanding of the physical aspects of death and its finality; however, some abstract concepts surrounding death and dying may be beyond their reach.
- High School-aged children have a full understanding of death and dying, its finality, and the impact of a death on the lives of themselves and others.

2. Know what to avoid when discussing death with your child.

Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away" or "was lost." These terms can turn your explanation away from the realities of death and can be very confusing or frightening, especially for younger children.

Don't chastise your child for crying or displaying sadness and vulnerability. Phrases such as "suck it up," "toughen up," "you're the man/woman of the house now", or "be a big kid" can be very damaging and have long-lasting effects on a child's outlook on death and overall emotional health.

3. Set up the environment where you will have the explanation.

Select an area that is comfortable, familiar, and allows for direct, one-on-one communication. Providing a safe space where children are free to express themselves and any emotions that may come over them is key.

Ensure the room is free from the distraction of computers, televisions and other electronic distractions that may divide their attention during the conversation.

Having toys, such as dolls, playset pots and pans, coloring books, and other playthings present in the room are quite beneficial in helping your child absorb your explanation. Play is the work of children and has been shown to be a therapeutic force for children when receiving information that is emotionally difficult to process.

Having the Conversation: Explaining Death to Your Child

You can use the following tenets as a general template for framing your explanation about death, and adjust it in accordance with what you feel will best serve your child's needs.

Provide a simple, honest explanation of death.

When explaining death, particularly to younger children, it's best to use simple terms that don't shy away from the reality of death and its permanence. Adding unnecessary details or using long, drawn-out explanations can cause a child to stop asking questions altogether, as they often simply don't want to listen to that much talking.

"Everything that lives, one day dies. Death is the end of living. When someone dies, their body stops working; they don't need to eat, drink, or breathe anymore. It is not like sleeping. Once someone dies, they are dead forever and cannot come back."

Keeping your answers short, simple, and free of unnecessary details can help children absorb your explanation and keeps the pathway open for future communication.

3 keys to remember when explaining death to your child

While your child's age and personality will play a large role in dictating what information is appropriate and useful when discussing death, incorporating the following into your explanation will help you inform your child and promote an environment of open communication.

1. Be honest and encourage questions.

During your explanation, let your child know that it's okay to ask any questions that might come to mind. You may not feel that you have all of the answers as an adult, but that's okay — you can respond to a question with an honest "I'm not quite sure about that."

Children benefit from honest information

Telling children in advance about the potential death of a family member or friend is beneficial because it:

- fosters an environment of open and honest communication
- enables children to get information from caregivers
- leaves less opportunity for children to imagine different or inaccurate explanations
- helps children make sense of the physical changes they see happening to a person who is unwell
- creates an opportunity for the ill person to play a role in preparing children for the possibility of his or her death
- allows time to put additional support systems in place, such as school counselors and grief programs, where available
- enables children to grieve with the adults in their lives, instead of alone and from the sidelines. Caregivers can help children understand that their emotions and those of others around them are healthy and natural
- gives children the chance, when the death of a loved one is imminent, to say goodbye in a way that feels appropriate for them, or to just be with the person with a shared knowing that their time together (at least physically) is limited
- enhances the trust between children and their primary caregivers.

Withholding information can create challenges

Most children and youth can sense when adults are withholding information, which can cause them to worry more. When information is withheld, children may learn about an impending death only by overhearing conversations not intended for their ears. Or they may hear it from people outside the immediate family. Children really benefit from learning of such news directly from their parents or guardians before hearing it from others. It can be difficult, if not impossible, for parents to control the flow of information outside the family. Therefore, the sooner parents open up conversations about dying with their kids, the less likely kids are to learn such upsetting news elsewhere.

There is a trust issue as well. If children discover that their parents or guardians knew about a loved one's impending death but intentionally didn't tell them, they may have difficulty trusting their caregivers in the future. This creates additional challenges in the children's grief process.

Honesty helps prepare children for life

When parents choose not to inform children of an impending death in the family, they usually have the best of intentions. Often, they are just trying to protect their children from emotional pain. In addition, facing one's own mortality or dealing with the potential death of a family member takes a tremendous emotional, physical, and spiritual toll on an individual. This makes finding the best way to support children that much more of a challenge. Many parents fear they will say something that "makes things even worse." It's important for parents to be compassionate toward themselves during this time while reminding themselves that the best protection for their children is to prepare them for life's hardships, such as an impending death. Preparing children for a death does not eliminate the heartbreak of the death. It helps children make sense of what is unfolding around them. Being prepared by caring adults for one of life's most difficult situations helps equip children with the emotional tools they need to withstand life's inevitable windstorms.

Open and Honest Communication about Death and Dying with Your Children

Learning about death and its realities is something that all children must experience. Though difficult, you, as a parent or significant adult, have a tremendous influence over how a child's thoughts and feelings about death begin to form.

By keeping honesty as a focus of your explanation and by allowing your child and yourself to openly express feelings and emotions, you lay the foundation for your child to develop a healthy relationship with the concepts of death and dying.

2. Let them know that any feeling that they have is okay.

Let your child know that this conversation is a safe place where they are free to feel whatever may wash over them. The death of a loved one is among the most painful and difficult experiences that people face; expressing and working through emotion doesn't equate to weakness — it shows strength and demonstrates the ability to understand and cope with difficult experiences.

3. Let the child know how you feel.

In the same spirit, you must allow yourself to feel emotion and to show that emotion to your child. Children are very aware of how the significant adults in their life respond to different situations. By allowing yourself to truly feel your emotions while in the presence of your child, you demonstrate that healthy, happy, strong adults aren't afraid to express emotions and that it's perfectly normal to feel sad during such sad times.

How Your Child May React to Your Explanation of Death

The news of a loved one's death and learning about the concept can be very difficult experiences for children. As they begin to process this new information, children may react in a variety of ways, each unique to their personality and temperament. No matter their reaction, understand and let them know that sadness, anger, and anything that they might feel is okay to feel.

Repeating the same questions

All of the new information about death, dying, and losing a loved one is a lot to process for a child, and it may result in them repeating the same question over and over. Know that this may not be the result of lack of understanding the news, but that the information is simply very difficult to accept.

A lack of emotion

This reaction serves to distance the child from the emotional pain of a loved one's death, and the new understanding that they, too, will one day die. Understand that this is not cruelty or callousness on behalf of the child, but an automatic response to receiving difficult news and information.

An emotional outburst

Children may react very strongly to the news of death or the thought of death directly affecting them. These reactions are normal and serve as an emotional outlet for children to express the frustration, helplessness, anger, and fear that they may be feeling.

Regressive actions and behaviors

Children often revert to more immature behaviors when confronted with the news and concepts of death. Needing to be held, needing to sleep in bed with parents, and having a difficulty being separate from parents and other significant adults are common.

Common Questions That Children Have about Death and How to Respond

During your explanation, your child will likely have questions about death, the dying process, and who and what will be affected by death in their life. Remember: it's okay to admit that you may not have an answer to a child's questions. The following questions are among the more commonly asked by children — particularly younger children — and some ideas as to how to best respond.

"Will I die?"

"All things that live will die — animals, plants, and even people — but children are normally very healthy and won't die for a very, very long time."

"Will you die?"

"Yes. I'm a living thing and I will die one day. Adults normally live for a long time and watch their children grow up to be adults. There will always be someone to take care of you."

"Why do people die?"

"There are a lot of reasons why people die. People can die from growing very old, an accident, or getting very sick with a very serious disease. A wish or a thought can never kill a person."

"What happens after a person dies?"

"After a person dies, we say goodbye to them. They cannot say goodbye back to us after they have died; instead, a person's family and friends gather together to say goodbye at a funeral."

"Where do people go when they die?"

"When a person dies, their body stops working and can never work again, but there are a lot of people who believe that a special part of us — a part of us that's not a part of our body — exists after our body dies. This part lives on in our memories of that person and lets us always have them with us to love and remember them after they have died."

Grief vs. Depression in Children

Grieving children are often mistakenly diagnosed with depression. While the two are very similar, it is important to know that grief is a physical, mental, and emotional reaction to the death of a loved one, while depression is a very serious mood disorder. It is normal, however, to see an overlap in the signs and symptoms of depression in a typically grieving child. Please let teachers, doctors, and counselors know about your child's loss to avoid a misdiagnosis.

A Child Who is Depressed...

- Feels sadness mixed with anger, sometimes directed at him/herself
- May consistently feel tired, loss of appetite, or have trouble sleeping, may be hyperactive or aggressive (masking depression)
- Expresses anger in the form of rage or denied being angry altogether
- May not recall dreams, and fantasizes infrequently
- May see himself as bad and worthless; is preoccupied with him/herself
- May be unresponsive to others or responds to pressure and urging
- Is rarely able to enjoy pleasure

A Child Who is Grieving...

- Feels sadness but mood can also stabilize the same day
- Has variable moods, activity levels, appetite, and sleep patterns
- Expresses anger at appropriate times even if not in appropriate ways
- Dreams and fantasizes, particularly about the loss
- May blame him/herself for somehow not preventing the death, is preoccupied with the loss
- Responds to warmth and reassurance
- Is able to experience pleasure at varying times

A grieving child, like a grieving adult, will experience some symptoms of depression. However, when the signs of depression seem to be prolonged, excessive, or destructive, or impair function, it is important to seek professional help from teachers, clergy, counselors, grief services, or doctors. It is also important to note any drastic changes in behavior, as this may also indicate a need for extra help.

How to Help a Grieving Child

These lessons have been adapted from the book. 35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child, the Dougy Center

Kids learn by asking questions about death. It's usually a sign that they're curious about something they don't understand. As an adult, a couple of the most important things you can do for children is to let them know that all questions are okay to ask, and to answer questions truthfully – even the hard ones. Be sensitive to their age and the language they use. No child wants to hear a clinical, adult-sounding answer to their question, but they don't want to be lied to either. Often the hardest time to be direct is right after a death. When a child asks what happened, use concrete words such as “died” or “killed” instead of vague terms like “passed away.” A young child who hears his mother say, “Dad passed away,” or “I lost my husband,” may be expecting that his father will return or simply needs to be found.

Give the child choices whenever possible.

Children appreciate having choices as much as adults do. They have opinions, and feel valued when allowed to choose. And they don't like to be left out. For example, it is meaningful and important experience for children to have the opportunity to say goodbye to the person who died in a way that feels right to them. They can be included in the selection of a casket, clothing, flowers and the service itself. Some children may also want to speak or write something to be included in the service, or participate in some other way.

After a death, having choices allows children to grieve a death in the way that is right for them. Sometimes children in the same family will choose differently. For example, one child may want pictures and memorabilia of the person who died, while another may feel uncomfortable with too many reminders around. If you are a parent, ask your child what feels right to them. Don't assume that what holds true for one child will be the same for another.

Talk about and remember the person who died.

“My daddy tickled me. He danced with me. He read to me.” Sarah, 9

Remembering the person who died is part of the healing process. One way to remember is simply to talk about the person who died. It's okay to use their name and to share what you remember.

You might say, “Your dad really liked this song,” or “Your mom was the best pie maker I know.” Bringing up the name of the person who died is one way to give the child permission to share their feelings. It reminds the child that it is not “taboo” to talk about the deceased. Sharing a memory has a similar effect. It also reminds the child that the person who died will continue to “live on” and impact the lives of those left behind. Children also like to have keepsakes of the person who died, such as objects which hold an emotional or relational significance. When his father died of a heart attack, Jeremy, 12, asked if he could have his Dad's work boots.

Although they were old, worn out and too big for his feet, they served as a memory of all the times his father had taken him to the construction site where he worked. Tom, 16, wanted to keep his dad's flannel shirt, which he wore on father-son fishing trips. Now Tom wears it when he goes fishing.

Recognizing that each person grieves in their own way is essential to the healing process for a family. Listen to children talk about their feelings and watch their behavior, and you will help clarify and affirm these natural differences.

Respect Differences in Grieving Styles

Several months after her Dad died of a heart attack, 7-year-old Jenny told her peer in a grief support group, “I have lots of tears inside, but I can’t get them out as easy as my Mom.” Children often grieve differently from their parents and siblings. Some children want to talk about the death, while others want to be left alone. Some like to stay busy and others withdraw from all activities and stay home. Younger children may be clingy, whereas teens may prefer to spend time on their own or with peers. Recognizing and respecting that each child grieves in their own way is essential to the healing process for a family. Listen to children, talk about their feelings, watch their behavior and reaffirm that their differences are okay.

Take a Break

Children grieve in cycles. For example, they may be more inclined to play and divert their focus from the death when the death is recent and parents are grieving intensely. More than adults, children need time to take a break from grief. It is important to know that it’s okay to take a break. Having fun or laughing is not disrespectful to the person who died; this is a vital part of grieving, too.

Listen without Judgement

One of the most helpful and healing things we can do for a child is to listen to their experiences without jumping into judge, evaluate or fix. Well meaning adults often try to comfort a child with phrases such as, “I know just how you feel,” or, worse, advices such as “get over it” or “move on.” While our intentions to soothe a grieving child are correct, using such responses negate the child’s own experiences and feelings. If a child says, “I miss my Dad who died.” Simply reflect back what you’ve heard, using their words, so they know that they’re being listened to. Use open-ended questions such as “What’s that been like?” or “How is that?”

Children are more likely to share their feelings without pressure to respond in a certain way. This is just one way we can validate their experiences and emotions, helping them regain a sense of safety, balance and control.

Hold a Memorial Service and Allow for Saying Goodbye

Allowing children and teens to say goodbye to the person who died is important in beginning the grieving process. A service enables children and teens to see how valued and important the person was to others and know that grieving the loss is okay. Before the service, let the children know what is going to happen, who will be there, where and when it takes place and why it’s important. Children who are prepared with this information are able to make the choice about attending the funeral. If they choose not to participate; invite them to create their own commemorative ritual or activity for saying goodbye – planting a flower or tree or holding a candle lighting ceremony.

How do I tell a child that someone has died?

Telling a child that a loved one has died is one of the most difficult tasks. There is no “one size fits all” in terms of what to say, but there are a few general principles that may help. The explanation given will vary depending on the circumstances of the death, but in any case, it is important to talk to children as soon as possible after the death. Start simply and preferably in person. Be honest and avoid any temptation to alter the truth. If there are questions that can’t be answered, tell them that you don’t know, but can try to find out. You may want to wait and see what questions children have before giving more information than they can handle at one time. It’s also helpful to reassure them that, “This is hard, but we will get through it together.”

What do I tell a child if their person died from suicide?

When talking with a child, it’s important to consider their age. Younger children often process information in smaller pieces. Older children and youth often have complex questions and might want a lot of information. When deciding how much to tell a child, follow their lead based on questions that you’re being asked. Answering questions honestly is important, as is explaining suicide in terms that they can understand. Children often overhear the word suicide and might be confused by what it means. It is more clear to say something like, “Suicide means that a person caused their own death.” By having an open conversation, you are allowing a child the opportunity to ask questions and have concerns addressed. It is okay to not know the answer to a question children might ask. The key is to create an environment where difficult, yet necessary conversations can take place.

What do I tell a child if their person died from homicide?

In the case of homicide, timing is even more important to supporting a young person and family. The very nature of homicide involves urgency and quick responses by support and law enforcement personnel that may involve participating in an open investigation, or an “on the scene” media presence that a family, child, or youth may be involved in before any real talk or support can be given. Supporters should be sensitive to whether the child/youth was witness to any events preceding the death, or the actual event itself before attempting to talk with them. This awareness can help you tailor your responses and resources for addressing possible trauma, or other related issues. Support should also factor in what a child or youth may have seen or heard about their person on television or social media. Information shared should clarify and answer questions about what has happened in an age-appropriate and honest manner. An awareness of the immediate impact of the homicide on the child’s/youth’s daily functioning can be more helpful than having all the answers.

Should a child attend the funeral and/or participate in the funeral?

It is natural to want to “protect” children from the painful reality of death but end of life rituals are vital to a child’s understanding of death and a key component of grief and mourning. Allowing children the option to attend and participate is important. Start by telling them what it will look like. Walk them through what they will see, who might come, what people might say, and how it might feel. Answer questions honestly and tell them when you don’t know the answer. Many parents find it helpful to have someone during the funeral that their child can go to if they want to take a break or stop participating. Identify someone you and your child trust to be available.

What reactions might you expect to see with a grieving child?

Each child grieves in their own unique way. How they grieve depends on their age, their stage of cognitive development, cultural influences, their relationship to the deceased, etc.

- ♦ Young children up to the age of 6 are subject to the kind of illogical or magical thinking typical of that developmental stage. They are also egocentric and may think that they somehow caused the death of their loved one. In addition, young children don't understand that death is irreversible and may be waiting for their loved one to return. They need reassurance, comfort, and patience on your part as you respond to their question(s).
- ♦ School aged children understand that death is permanent but still struggle to make sense of what happened. Respond to their questions honestly, using direct language. Know that they are old enough to hear the answer if they've asked the question. They may lack the ability to verbalize their feelings and may behave in ways that cause additional problems. They may have trouble tolerating strong emotions and are triggered by reminders of the deceased and will need to learn ways to cope with those feelings and thoughts.
- ♦ Adolescents are also egocentric and struggle with guilt and regret when a loved one dies. They may attempt to cope with their grief in ways that can be impulsive or even unhealthy. Supporters should keep the lines of communication open with the youth and should promote supportive relationships. Participation in grief support programs for bereaved children and youth can be beneficial and can provide opportunities to connect with others who are also coping with a death.

How to help a child transition back to school? When should they go back to school?

Going back to school after a death can be an emotional experience for children and caregivers. Although there isn't a "right" time to go back to school, it is important to promote a return to routine activities and structure. Caregivers should consider the child's level of comfort in being separated from supportive adults and may want to have children attend half days or come to school for lunch breaks to help ease the transition. It is important that school personnel know about the death and caregiver's share what has been helpful to the child. The impact of a death on a child's academic functioning can be unpredictable. Grief reactions can intensify at any time. In some situations, grief can influence a child's ability to make decisions, and impair memory and concentration, resulting in a decline in school performance. There can also be symptoms similar to ADHD, including disorganization, distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Grieving students are likely to benefit from additional social, emotional, and learning supports. School personnel might consider making accommodations for children, such as opportunities for breaks or time with a counselor during the day, reduced workload or assignment extensions, assistance with organization and time management, or tutoring when needed.

What are some of the challenges a child may face at school?

There are many common challenges grieving children express having at school. Many might be nervous to return to school because they are worried that others might ask them about their loved one's death. Some report being distracted and even frustrated because they cannot concentrate on their work. Some have reported that they are worried they might have a grief trigger and

get upset or cry in front of their peers. Some have reported being bullied or picked on by others, and some share that people say things that were intended to be helpful or comforting, but that were actually hurtful. Even with all these potential challenges, school remains a safe, structured environment for children that can be helpful as they adapt to life without the person who died. It is helpful to be with friends, get out of the house, and take part in coordinated, fun activities. Counselors and other school personnel can be encouraging, schedule time to “check-in” about how everything is going and listen when a child needs to express their frustrations.

How to support a grieving child?

Grief can be difficult for any child to comprehend and sharing their feelings can be a challenge. Children often feel frightened, angry, sad, or confused. They may not know how to express themselves or ask for help in a clear or mature way. Often when a child has challenging behaviors - they are trying to communicate a need for help, a strong feeling, or just lack the vocabulary and skills needed. It is easy to see negative behavior or acting out as intentional, however, it may just be a reflection of the child’s limitations and desire for support. While no loss experience should excuse antisocial or dangerous behavior, it’s important not to miss the messages in a child’s actions. Set clear limits for the negative behavior and focus on safety being absolute. Offer healthier ways for the child to express their feelings. Be confident, but not overly critical, when commenting on misbehavior.

Will the child be okay?

Current research indicates that bereaved youth usually go on to lead healthy and productive lives. It is natural to see changes in children’s behaviors after a death, including signs of sadness, anger, and fear. It is helpful to be aware of signs that can tell us when a child may be in need of more formalized, professional support. Some behaviors that might indicate the need for further support include: 1) inability to keep up with daily tasks, such as regularly attending school, completing schoolwork, and personal hygiene; 2) significant, ongoing signs of extreme sadness, sobbing, or social withdrawal; 3) risky, harmful behaviors such as drug use, reckless driving, or stealing; 4) inability to acknowledge the death, or appearing numb or disconnected from the reality of the death; or 5) persistent fantasies about ending their life in order to be reunited with the deceased person in an afterlife. It is important to trust your instincts about whether the child is struggling excessively to cope in the aftermath of a death.

How to Help a Grieving Teen

The Dougy Center

What is it like for teenagers when someone close to them dies? How do they respond to the death of a parent, a sibling, a relative, a friend?

In our work with teenagers, we've learned that teens respond better to adults who choose to be companions on the grief journey rather than direct it. We have also discovered that adult companions need to be aware of their own grief issues and journeys because their experiences and beliefs impact the way they relate to teens.

Six Basic Principles of Teen Grief

- 1. Recognize that grieving is the teen's natural reaction to death.** Grief is a natural reaction to death and other losses. However, grieving does not feel natural because it may be difficult to control the emotions, thoughts, or physical feelings associated with a death. The sense of being out of control that is often a part of grief may overwhelm or frighten some teens. Grieving is normal and healthy, yet may be an experience teens resist and reject. Helping teens accept the reality that they are griever allows them to do their grief work and to progress in their grief journey.
- 2. Acknowledge that each teen's grieving experience is unique.** Grieving is a different experience for each person. Teens grieve for different lengths of time and express a wide spectrum of emotions. Grief is best understood as a process in which bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors surface in response to the death, its circumstances, the past relationship with the deceased, and the realization of the future without the person. For example, sadness and crying may be an expression of grief for one teen, while another may respond with humor and laughter. While many theories and models of the grieving process provide a helpful framework, the path itself is an individual one, and often lonely. No book or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a teen will or should go through on the journey. Adults can assist grieving teenagers by accompanying them on their journey in the role of listener and learner, and by allowing the teen to function as a teacher.
- 3. Respect differences in grieving styles.** There are no "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve. Sometimes adults express strong opinions about "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. But there is no correct way to grieve. Coping with a death does not follow a simple pattern or set of rules nor is it a course to be evaluated or graded. There are, however, "helpful" and "unhelpful" choices and behaviors associated with the grieving process. Some behaviors are constructive and encourage facing grief, such as talking with trusted friends, journaling, creating art, and expressing emotion rather than holding it inside. Other grief responses are destructive and may cause long-term complications and consequences. For example, some teens attempt to escape their pain through many of the same escape routes adults choose: alcohol and substances abuse, reckless sexual activity, antisocial behaviors, withdrawal from social activities, excessive sleeping, high risk taking behaviors, and other methods that temporarily numb the pain of their loss.
- 4. Talk about how every death is unique and is experienced differently.** The way teens grieve differs according to personality and the particular relationship they had with the deceased. They typically react in different ways to the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, child, or friend. For many teens, peer relationships are primary.
- 5. Keep in mind that the death or loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend may seem to affect them more than the death of a sibling or grandparents.** Within a family each person may mourn differently at a different time. One may be talkative, another may tend to cry often, and a third might withdraw. This can generate a great deal of tension and misunderstanding within the already stressed family. Each person's responses to death should be honored as his or her way of coping in that moment. Keep in mind that responses may change from day to day or even from hour to hour.

- 6. Know that the grieving process is influenced by many issues.** The impact of a death on a teen relates to a combination of factors including:
- Social support systems available for the teen (family, friends, and/or community)
 - Circumstances of the death – how, where and when the person died
 - Whether or not the young person unexpectedly found the body
 - The nature of the relationship with the person who died – harmonious, abusive, conflictual, unfinished, communicative
 - The teen’s involvement in the dying process
 - The emotional and developmental age of the teen
 - The teen’s previous experiences with death
- 7. Listen. Grief is ongoing.** Grief never ends, but it does change in character and intensity. Many griever have compared their grieving to the constantly shifting tides of the ocean; ranging from calm, low tides to raging high tides that change with the seasons and the years.

Supporting Grieving Siblings

From the Dougy Center: The
National Center of Grieving
Children and Families

The death of a sibling is often defined as a before-and-after experience in childhood. A sibling's death will change a child's life forever. In the face of the upheaval that often follows a death, it can be overwhelming to know how to help your child or teen in the days, months, and years afterwards. Here are some suggestions.

Communicate Openly

Be honest

One of the first questions people ask after a death is, "How do I tell my children?" Start with a short, simple explanation about the death, in language they can understand, and then let their questions guide what else to share. With younger children it might sound like this: "Your sister Michelle died. This means her body stopped working and the doctors weren't able to fix it." Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they can confuse children. For older children or teens, you might say something like this: "Honey, I have terrible news, Jack was hit and killed by a car when he was biking home from Scott's." Even though it can be hard to think about saying these words, know that being honest and open is a great first step in helping grieving children and teens. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation and also keeps children and teens from having to use their limited energy and inner resources trying to figure out what happened.

Repeat

Don't be surprised if younger children ask repeated questions about the person or death. Young children often don't understand that death is permanent and will ask questions like, "I know Katy died, but will we see her for dinner?" or, "I know Shaquille's in heaven, but will he come home soon?" This doesn't mean you did a bad job of explaining, it's just their way of trying to make sense of what happened. You can try by repeating the same simple and honest explanation you gave about death. Here's an example: "Honey, remember when I told you that Katy died and her body stopped working? That means we won't see her at dinner, but if you want, we can look at pictures of her when we get home." It can be

painful to have to repeat the story again, but know that by doing so you are helping children to understand.

Listen

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, and make judgements. What's most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating. Sometimes the best response is to say back what you heard without adding reassurance or opinions: "You really miss your sister, especially on the bus ride to school." Listening to children and teens, without trying to fix anything or make it better, is one of the best ways to help them feel heard and supported. Once children and teens trust that you will listen and understand, they'll be more likely to come to you when hurting or needing advice.

Acknowledge Differences

The roles that people have in their families often change after a death. Family members can be unsure about their responsibilities and feel pressure (from themselves or others) to fill in for the absence of the person who died. It's helpful for adults to reassure children that they are not responsible for replacing their sibling in the family dynamic. If the child who died always brought humor to family gatherings, start by acknowledging how things might feel without them there, and remind siblings that they aren't expected to fill in as the comedian. Some children or teens may want to carry on the roles of their siblings; it's important for this to be a choice, and not something they think they have to do to keep the family going.

Honor Uniqueness

Celebrate Their Individuality

Grieving children and teens can sometimes feel like they grow up in the shadow of the sibling who died. There can be pressure (real or imagined) to do as well as their sibling or to not make the same mistakes. The comparisons can be subtle and seemingly positive, such as a teacher saying, "You remind me so much of your brother: I bet you're going to be as great in school as he was." They can also be shaming: "You better make good choices, or you're going to end up just like your sister."

Some children and teens experience survivor guilt and feel as though the family would have been better off if they were the one who died instead of their sibling.

You can help children and teens by celebrating their individuality which includes their unique contributions to the family, and growing up without the pressure of having to make up for the loss of their sibling.

Recognize the Uniqueness of Connections

It's important to recognize that the relationship each person in the family had with the child or teen who died is distinct. The connection a sister had with her brother might have elements that are very different from the relationships she had with her parents, or with another sibling. No two people have exactly the same relationship; there are differing aspects of each relationship that make it unique. These include both positive and negative aspects. Create space for children and teens to talk about what was special about the bond they had with their sibling. Allow children and teens to participate in decisions about ways to honor the sibling who died, or other important rituals such as what to do on the death anniversary of their sibling's birthday, whether and when to visit a gravesite, and how to keep the memory of the sibling alive.

Meet Children and Teens with Acceptance

Grievors of all ages tend to be hard on themselves, whether for crying, not crying, being strong, being a mess, thinking about the person, or not thinking about the person. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, just individual and unique responses. Children can grieve very differently from adults and from one another. Even within the same family, one child might want to keep pictures of his brother out, while his sister prefers to have photos in a drawer in her room. You can help children and teens (and yourself) by letting them know that all of their thoughts and feelings are okay. Allowing children and teens to grieve in their own ways reinforces that there are many ways to respond, and that it's okay to find what works best for them.

Remember that Children are still Children

When a child or teen dies, it's common for adults to grow more protective and concerned about the health and success of other children or teens in the family. For grieving siblings, this additional concern can feel overwhelming. It's important to allow grieving siblings

the chance to still be children. This means giving them the space to make mistakes and have freedoms that other children have. Some children or teens will feel pressure, whether from others or themselves to take care of younger siblings or even their parents.

Give Options

Offer Choices

Children and teens appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. The death of a sibling can leave children and teens feeling powerless and out of control. Giving them choices can help them regain a sense of power and trust. The memorial service is a good example of a situation where it's helpful to give children and teens choices. You might give your child or teen the option whether to attend, where to sit, what to wear, or how to participate. Children and teens might have ideas for what flowers, music, and readings to use, or other ways they want to be involved.

Provide Outlets for Expression

While some children and teens will talk about their experiences, many will express themselves through art, writing, music, or creative play. Get out the crayons, paper, markers, paint, clay, and other art materials. You can offer ideas such as making a card for their sibling, creating a collage of pictures, or writing a letter, but be open to their ideas and suggestions for projects. It's helpful to ask children if they want to share what they created with you, and to respect a "no" answer. Some children will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression, so be sure to create time and space for them to engage in big energy play like running outside, sports, or messy creative projects.

Take Care of Yourself

Find Sources of Support for Yourself

If you are parenting a grieving child or teen, one of the best ways to help your children is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Find good sources of support. Research shows us that how well a child does after the death of someone in the family is linked to how well the adults in their lives are doing. This doesn't mean hiding your grief from your child. Rather, it means ensuring that you have people and activities in your life that are sources of comfort and inspiration. By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them.

Talking with Kids about a Death from Addiction

*Adapted from Jennifer Wiles,
MA, LMHC, BC-DMT*

Families and children who have experienced the death of someone important in their lives due to substance use disorder have a unique set of needs. Along with the trauma of the death itself, the stigma surrounding both grief and the disease of addiction adds layers of complication to this life-changing event.

As many of us are aware, opioid use and substance use deaths are on the rise and overdoses are more frequent. Therefore, the number of kids who are affected by a substance use death is rising as well.

No two families are the same: In some cases, children have witnessed addiction up close for many years and some adapt by becoming “adults” before their time. They may have adopted the role of caregiver to a parent who is struggling with the disease of addiction. Some children become overly responsible, goal-achieving and hyper-vigilant about potential risks in their environment. Sometimes their education is interrupted and learning challenges may become apparent including a broad array of symptoms from attentional issues to behavioral challenges. Some families develop a culture of secrecy which can make the death harder for children to talk about and understand.

Grief Response: Guilt is not something to “get over” but something that we experience in different ways throughout our lifetimes. It is important for the children and families in this situation to feel: Respected, Informed, Connected, and Empowered

The information below is meant to provide some insight and ideas on how to support a child who has experienced the death of a loved one from the disease of addiction based on the R.I.C.E. model.

RESPECT:

This is a confusing and difficult time for you and the children. Even if they don’t have all of the information, they are most likely picking up on changes in routines, family interactions, and different displays of emotion. Here are some ideas for acknowledging these changes with respect.

- **Practice patience and compassion and develop routines:** Keep in mind that all children need limits, structure and boundaries, even in the most challenging of times.
- **Understand their development:** Children’s concept of death and response to grief changes as their brain develops. Understand their response to grief and ways to support them based on their age.
- **Funerals:** There are many age-appropriate ways to involve children in a funeral. Some families want to “shield” their children from the pain of a funeral. But many will benefit from being included. Perhaps they could write something to be read or draw something to be shared. Maybe they could help select the music.
- **Respect the memory:** Be open to talking about the person who has died and to keep the memory of that person strong in your hearts.

INFORM:

Many families struggle with how to inform their children about a substance use death. Again, there is no right or wrong way to do this, but the following guidelines may be helpful.

- **Prepare:** Take a moment for yourself before you talk with your child. Take a couple of deep breaths. Think about what you are going to say.

- **Practice patience and compassion:** Be prepared to repeat things several times. The concepts of death, addiction and substance use are challenging for all of us to comprehend. Most children will not “get it” the first time it is discussed. Think of these “repetitions” as opportunities to remind the child that they are loved, safe, brave and kind.
- **The Truth:** Always speak the truth, in an age-appropriate way. Remember that, often what a child has imagined or heard from others can be almost worse than the reality. Given the amount of information that is available from social media, they may know more than you think they do and/or they may be misinformed. Talk about addiction as a disease, just like cancer or heart disease. Blame the illness of addiction, and not the person, for the death.
- **Use facts:** “Daddy died from an illness. That illness is called addiction.”
- **Answer questions:** Children may ask about medicine and alcohol.
- **What you can do:**
 - Teach children how to take medicine properly, how to follow directions and how to read the label.
 - Do not tell children that vitamins or medicine are candy, to get them to take it.
 - Make sure children know only to take medicine or vitamins from a parent or another trusted grownup.
- **Continue to connect:** Begin and end each conversation by emphasizing that the child is loved and safe. This can’t be said enough! Check in with the child to see how they are doing after the conversation. “That was a really hard thing to talk about. I wonder how you are now? What might help you? Shall we take a walk, or just sit quietly for a few minutes?”
- **Seek Support:** Look for local support resources. Ask for help. Seek connections within your community. Support can also come from unexpected places such as school, places of worship, clubs or teams.

EMPOWER:

You are going through something that is difficult. You can give children and yourself the tools that you need in order to survive this situation. Here are some ways to empower yourself and your family:

- **Mindfulness:** Practice taking some deep breaths, or mindfulness exercises.
- **The Seven C’s:** Post the Seven C’s in your home or office. Children are not responsible for the family member’s substance use and they can focus on healthy coping skills. The Seven C’s are: I didn’t cause it, I can’t control it, I can’t cure it, but I can take care of myself by communicating my feelings, making good choices, and celebrating myself.
- **Model Self-Care:** It is important that you are kind and patient with yourself and get support. Children will notice and learn from this! They will be encouraged to know that you are taking care of yourself. This will help them to feel safe. Try getting some fresh air everyday: walking or exercising. Stay hydrated. Practice some deep breathing exercises.
- **“You are safe”:** So much of the work with these kids is to make them feel safe. Reassure them that you are healthy and safe and that you will be there for them if they need you.
- **Provide Tools:** Children will be asked some tough questions. Give the child “scripts” so that they can be prepared in different situations when asked questions. Perhaps you can write some scripts yourself.
- **Prevention:** Learn more about how you can break the cycle of addiction in your family. Prevention is an important part of this process for any child.

CONNECT:

Above all, children need to feel that they are loved, that they are safe and that they are important. As difficult, heart breaking and unfathomable as this is, it is also an opportunity to build connections and reinforce what is important in your family. Perhaps taking the time to sit with a child will give you comfort as well.

- **Lead with Love:** Always reassure the child that they are loved, that the person loved them and that the illness and death isn’t their fault.
- **Emotions are high:** Tell your child that they may notice adults acting differently. You may say, “You may see me crying sometimes. I know you aren’t used to seeing me cry. I want you to know that everybody cries. I am OK, though, and crying helps us to release emotions.”

Parents: How to Talk to Kids about Suicide

Talia Lakritz, Insider

Talking to Children about Suicide

Adults often want to protect children from the harsh realities of life and find it difficult to talk about suicide with children. However, protecting them may take away opportunities to heal. As children hear adults talking about the death of their loved one, they will create their own versions of events. Age-appropriate, truthful information provides opportunities to address any concerns or misconceptions children have around the person's death.

Many caregivers and parents also hesitate to discuss suicide out of embarrassment, confusion, or fear. Talking about depression, mental illness, and suicide takes away the stigma and opens up lines of communication that are essential as families support one another after a death. Below are suggestions and information to help you have these important conversations.

Many adults feel that children are too young to hear the truth about a death and are nervous to use the terms "died" or "suicide". Using the phrase "died by suicide" will help you discuss the manner in which the person died. The term "committed suicide" can suggest a crime was committed and "completed suicide" can suggest an accomplishment was achieved.

Depending on the age of the children, the information they seek and need will vary. Provide basic facts and allow their questions to guide the conversation. Here are some examples to explain suicide and answer their questions:

- *"He died by suicide."*
- *"Dead means the body has stopped working and it cannot be fixed"*

- *"Our thoughts and feelings come from our brain and sometimes a person's brain can get very sick – just like a body can. This is sometimes referred to as mental illness. This sickness can cause a person to feel really, really sad and hopeless. Some people feel like the only way their hurting and sadness will go away is to make their own body stop working."*
- *Encourage children to talk to adults about their questions and feelings. "You probably have a lots of questions about what happened. You can always ask me and let's brainstorm some other adults you can talk to."*
- *If they ask how it happened, provide truthful but simple information. "She took too many pills." "He hurt himself and his body stopped working."*

To help your child through their grief, be present and actively listen without trying to make it better or by taking away their pain. Allow them to share what they are thinking and feeling and discuss the memories they have of the person who died. Share stories, use the person's name, and show them that it's okay to cry or laugh- help them see they are not alone on this journey.

Magical Thinking and Regrets

Some children believe they played a direct role in the death — a concept called magical thinking. They may think back on things they could have done or should or shouldn't have said to the person who died. Regrets are a common part of grief, but sometimes these thoughts make them feel like they had a part in the person's death. They feel their words or actions had enough power to influence someone to suicide. Remind children that their loved one died because their brain was sick and not thinking clearly. Many factors play into why someone would die by suicide and no single factor caused the death.

How Children Grieve

Children grieving a death by suicide will experience a wide range of feelings and all of these feelings are normal. Children may express their feelings through behaviors rather than words. Help them find appropriate ways to express and release what is inside through art, activity, and play.

Younger children may also regress in their behaviors, such as bed-wetting or needing an old comfort item. Usually these behaviors will diminish as the child adjusts to this time in their life. As long as the child isn't hurting themselves or others, any expression of grief is normal and okay.

When a death happens, children worry about how it will affect their life and who will be there to take care of them. They may worry about another death occurring or about who will take them to school. Providing information about their schedule and who will meet their needs can decrease their anxiety.

Grief comes in waves. It is not unusual for children to be very emotional or ask a lot of questions and then suddenly appear not to be impacted by the death. This is their way of taking in only as much as they can handle at that time. They may return with many emotions or questions along with the need to retell their story over and over.

Support for the Grief Journey

As children grow, their grief will evolve. This experience is a part of who they are and things will never go back to the way they were. They may re-experience their grief as they reach various milestones. It's important to check-in with them and support healthy ways for them to re-process their grief.

Your local bereavement organization may offer programs and ways to support your child throughout their life. Resources, like a peer, grief-support group, provide opportunities to learn from others and feel less isolated. Many of their friends have not experienced something like this, so groups help to normalize their grief and create a helpful support system.

The most important way for you to support your child is to model healthy grief responses. Children learn about grief from watching the adults in their lives. Reach out to other family, friends, or professionals for care and support. Find activities that acknowledge your grief and allow you to remember the person who died. Be patient and give yourself time.

Supporting Children and Teens after a Suicide

*From The Dougy Center:
The National Center for
Grieving Children & Families*

Explaining suicide death to a child or teen can feel overwhelming and intimidating. As adults, we often want to protect them from the stigma and shame that can accompany such a death. Here are some tips for talking with children and teens about a suicide death and ways to support them in their grief.

Talking about Suicide

How do I tell my child or teen? It's a question we hear a lot. Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in language children can understand. Let their questions guide what else to share. You do not have to describe in detail what happened (unless they ask, and then you should answer honestly). You might say, "I have very sad news, Mommy died of something called suicide. She shot herself." or "Your dad died last night, he took too many pills." Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost (as in "we lost her"), as they can confuse children.

Even though these discussions can be hard to have, being honest and open is an important first step in helping grieving children. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation, and also keeps children from using their limited energy and inner resources to figure out what happened. Children who are not told the truth often fill in the blanks themselves, sometimes with a story that is worse than what actually happened. In fact, many children and teens come to believe that they somehow caused the death, especially if no one will tell them what happened. News also travels fast, and it is important for children to hear about death from a caring adult rather than through social media or gossip.

"Why?" is often the first question everyone asks after someone dies of suicide. You can support children and teens by explaining there are many factors that can lead someone to die of suicide. A suicide death is not the

result of a single event such as a break up, loss of a job, a death, and a major disappointment, even though it may seem like that event was the cause of the death. Suicide death is a result of someone experiencing unbearable emotional pain, feeling hopeless about it ever getting better, and thinking death is the only way to stop the pain.

Children and teens might blame themselves and wonder if they could have done something to prevent the death. They may also fear they or someone else they care about will die of suicide. You can reassure them that the death was not their fault. You can also offer support by listening, encouraging them to come to you with questions and concerns, helping them find ways to express their thoughts and emotions. Sharing with them about the ways you are seeking support for yourself can ease fears they may have about your health and safety.

Reactions and Behaviors

Children may experience many different emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, powerlessness, loneliness, shame, guilt, numbness, and relief. Their reactions may depend on their age, personality, experiences with death, and developmental level. Sometimes children don't show any visible reaction at all. There are no right or wrong feelings in grief, just individual experiences.

It is not uncommon for a child or teen to feel relief after the death, especially if mental health issues created turmoil. Some may feel the parent abandoned them, or that they were unlovable. Children tend to move quickly from one emotion to another, crying one minute and asking for a snack the next. With powerful emotions like anger and fear, consider finding ways for children to safely express them. Remind children that while it's okay to have big feelings. "You are really, really angry right now, and that's okay," it's not okay to hurt anyone or

anything. “You can be really angry, but you can’t kick me or throw your toys at the dog. You can punch the punching bag or stomp on the bubble wrap.”

Depression vs. normal teen angst

The transition from childhood to adulthood is by nature a stormy, stressful time of physical and emotional changes and challenges. So how do you know when a teen is depressed? The big differences are length and intensity of symptoms.

Mood changes and feelings of sadness are normal, but they don’t generally last for more than a few days. Depression involves feelings of hopelessness, anger and frustration that last much longer – and get in the way of daily life. Changes in eating or sleeping habits, a drop in performance in school and sports, statements of self-harm, loss of interest in friends, or activities they used to enjoy – all are indicators of potential depression.

Signs of depression:

- Prolonged anger, frustration or tearfulness
- Withdrawal from activities of previous enjoyment (sports, clubs, etc.)
- Loss of relationships or lack of interest in them (peer friendships, romantic relationships)
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping excessively
- Change in appetite: not eating or eating too much, which may even effect weight
- Moving or speaking slowly (or too quickly if expressing signs of mania)
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering information, which can include a drop in academic performance
- Increased thoughts or references to death or suicide including self-harm behaviors

A higher risk of suicide for depressed teens

Adolescents and young adults are still developing in the limbic system of the brain, which regulates their emotions, as well as their prefrontal cortex, which is in charge of impulse control. Add depression into the mix, and the combination of intense emotional triggers with impulsive thoughts of escape puts adolescents and young adults at higher risk of making a potentially fatal decision.

Depression is far and away the greatest risk factor in suicide, but it’s treatable with help. The key is to catch it. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends annual depression screening for teens.

What to do for a teen with depression

Parents don’t have to wait for a depression screening if they notice something off with their teen. A conversation is a great place to start. Depression is isolating, and just the process of bringing it into the open can be therapeutic in itself.

If parents do suspect their child may have depression, their best first resource is probably their primary care provider, who can refer to other resources if needed. Generally the treatment includes talk therapy and sometimes medication.

One big benefit to therapy: Parents aren’t necessarily trained to see the signs of suicide, but a therapist is. By developing a relationship with the teen and family, a therapist can spot signs of trouble and treat them before they get worse.

How to talk to teens about suicide

Even if a teen isn’t showing signs of depression, the most important thing parents can do to prevent suicide is to talk to their kids about it. Like sex, drugs, bullying or any other topic facing teens, suicide is fraught with discomfort and stigma. Misinformation abounds - which makes it that much more crucial to discuss. And an honest conversation about suicide lets teens know they can come to you with issues if they need to.

Of course, suicide isn’t the easiest subject to broach. Here are few tips for getting the conversation started (and keeping it positive):

- Do bring it up naturally
 - Leverage TV shows and media coverage of the topic to start a conversation. An indirect approach can be helpful: “Something like, ‘Hey, I read an article about this. What do you think?’”
- Don’t worry about “putting ideas in their heads”
 - A conversation is not going to make a kid depressed or suicidal. In fact, openly discussing suicide with teens can mitigate the effects of a suicide in a community, since “copycat” suicides are often fueled by glamorization and misconception.

- Do counter the stigma
 - Anything a child interprets as judgment or stigma could cause them to shut down and not want to talk about it again. If a kid does express those thoughts, stay calm. Take it seriously and listen, but as much as possible, contain your own emotional reaction. Kids are going to be hypersensitive to your perception of it, and a lot of kids will perceive a parent's fearful reaction as anger - which enhances the secrecy around it.
- Don't try to fix it
 - Instead, hear teens out, be supportive and seek professional help. Stay vigilant of any patterns, mood changes, loss of hope about the future, or shifts in grades or sports performance.

What Helps

When children and teens are grieving, people can be quick to offer advice and give opinions. What's most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or evaluating. It can be tempting to minimize their feelings, or convince them to think or feel differently than they do. If it's a case of misinformation, it's helpful to provide the correct details, but still allow them to express their take on things. Sometimes the best response is to validate their thoughts and feelings. For example, "You really get uncomfortable when kids at school talk about hating their mom. You wish they knew what it's like to have a mom die." Responding in this way helps children and teens trust that you will listen, leaving them more likely to come to you when they're hurting or needing advice. You don't have to have all of the answers. There are many questions surrounding a suicide death that do not have answers. It's okay to say you don't know.

Life is often in upheaval after a suicide death, so it's helpful to find ways to create predictability. Examples include: routines around breakfast, getting to school, after-school, chores, and bedtime. Children may also need some flexibility so they know what to expect, "Bedtime is at 7:30pm," but can trust that if they need something different ("Tonight we can read an extra story"), the people in their world will be responsive.

When someone dies, children can feel powerless and out of control. Giving children choices can help them

regain a sense of power and control in their world and trust that they can have a say in their lives. Provide day to day choices that are in line with their developmental level. For example: "Would you like hot or cold cereal for breakfast?" "I need help with dinner, would you like to set the table or clear the dishes?" "The trash needs to go out today, would you rather take it out this morning or after school?"

It's also important to let children and teens make choices about issues directly related to the death and their grief. Examples include asking children and teens if they want to help with sorting the belongings of the person who died (and which items they would like to keep) and how they want to acknowledge significant days such as holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of the death.

Children and teens often turn to play, movement, and creativity to express themselves and make sense of their situation. Consider offering opportunities for playing with dolls and puppets; creating art of all kinds (remember the process is more important than the product); and writing, journaling, and making videos. Big energy play like running, punching a bag, shooting hoops, pounding on a drum, and sports can be safe ways to express strong emotions, as can playing an instrument, writing songs, or simply listening to music.

Remember and talk about how the person lived rather than just about how they died. Their life was unique and important. After a suicide death, people often avoid talking about the person who died because they don't know what to say. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life: "Your daddy really liked going fishing with you," or "Your mom was a great cook, I know you loved her pancakes." Sometimes just remembering to say the person's name can be very meaningful to children and teens.

Funerals, Memorials, and Celebration of Life Services Many families who have experienced a suicide death wonder if they should hold a service and if children should be allowed to attend. Every family is different, but we've learned from children and teens that having some way of saying goodbye is important. Ask children and teens how much they want to be involved in the

planning. They often have clear ideas about how they want to honor the person who died. For some families, choosing to have a service is another way of breaking down the stigma that can surround a suicide death.

Support at School

School can provide routine, familiarity, and consistency. It can also be a source of stress, depending on how understanding and flexible the school community is. Talk with teachers and other staff about the death and how they can be supportive. Ask your child what they would like to share with their classmates and others in the school, and help children plan how they will respond to questions. Here are some examples: "My brother died of suicide." "My mom died from taking too many pills." "My dad died, that is all I want to say right now." Sometimes families are surprised when members of the school community know more about the death than you and your children had planned to share. Consider preparing children for unexpected and sometimes unkind questions and comments.

Be Aware of Words

When talking about a suicide death the words you use matter. There are some ways of talking about it that can add to the shame and stigma surrounding suicide. For example, consider avoiding the phrase "committed suicide." Committed is a word associated with criminal behavior ("He committed a felony"). Instead, try saying "he died by suicide" or "she killed herself." Using this language decreases stigma and judgment by talking about suicide the way we would any other type of death ("She died of cancer"). Another challenging phrase is "successfully completed suicide." Remembering someone for being successful or unsuccessful at killing themselves adds to stigma. Negative comments such as, "That was such a selfish act," "He was so crazy, no wonder he killed himself," and "What a cowardly way to go," are not helpful. If questions come up, you can ask, "You're wondering if Daddy was being selfish. What do you think?" You can then add something to help them better understand how intense emotional pain can lead people to feel hopeless and think death is the only option to stop the pain they are in.

Address the Stigma

Talking openly and answering questions honestly is the one of the best ways to decrease stigma. It is often a shocking and uncomfortable topic and most people don't know what to say. By talking openly about it at home, you help children and teens feel less afraid of what has happened and more prepared to respond to the discomfort and judgment of others.

Get Extra Help if Needed

While most children and teens will ultimately return to their prior level of functioning following a death, some are potentially at risk for developing challenges such as depression, difficulties at school, or anxiety. Some families find it helpful to attend a support group where they can connect with others who are also grieving a suicide death. While friends, family, or a support group may be enough for most children, others may require additional assistance. If you notice ongoing behaviors that interfere with a child's daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don't be afraid to ask about their experience and training in supporting children and teens after a suicide death. If you or a child you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, please call The National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-TALK (8255). They are available 24/7.

Find Sources of Support for Yourself

If you are parenting or supporting a grieving child, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. This doesn't mean hiding your grief from children and teens. Rather, it means ensuring that you have people and activities in your life that are sources of comfort and inspiration. By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them. A great place to start is the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. [<https://afsp.org/find-support/>]

These are just a few tips for supporting children and teens after a suicide death. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

Returning to School After a Suicide Loss: For Teens

American Foundation
for Suicide Prevention

The teen years are typically a time of self-discovery. Teens spend time thinking about their place in the world and who they plan to become. When someone close to them dies by suicide, teens frequently struggle with how the death changes their identity and what they think not only of themselves, but of their family. A loss by suicide often challenges a teen's assumptions about life and how the world works. Many report realizing, for the first time, that life is not predictable or fair.

Discussing in School

Returning to school after losing someone to suicide can be stressful for teens. Their peers will frequently ask a lot of questions about who died and how they died. It is recommended that teens have an idea, in advance, about how they might want to answer these questions. Caregivers can help teens by providing them with ample opportunities to think about how much they want to share and with whom. If a teen does not want to talk about their loss with anyone at school, it is advised that caregivers let them know that that is okay, too. It is not uncommon for teens to want privacy after a loss.

Social Media

In this day and age, with the Internet and social media, it is becoming less and less likely that the death will remain private. There are simply too many ways that information is spread. Think about all the ways teens communicate – texting, phone calls, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter. Information (both factual and rumors) spreads quickly. It is helpful for parents to discuss these possibilities with their teens, and explore how they will cope with them as they arise.

Responding to Hurtful Comments

Sometimes people will say insensitive things after a suicide loss occurs, either by accident or on purpose. Someone attempting to comfort the teen, might unintentionally cause upset. For example, one well-meaning comment often spoken is, "At least they are not in pain anymore." For some, this comment

might come across as minimizing the grief that is felt by the teen. Other times, a comment might be said that is intentionally mean or harmful.

Caregivers can help teens manage hurtful comments by empowering them to tell the person directly that the comment was hurtful. They can also empower them by letting them know they can walk away and ignore anyone who is intentionally trying to be mean and unkind. Just like with younger children, it is important for teens to have a safety plan in place if they get upset or begin to feel overwhelmed during school hours. Caregivers can assist their teens in identifying the best plan or solution to help them during school hours.

Changing Friend Groups

One way teens cope is by spending time with their friends. Sometimes teens have a change in their group of friends after a suicide loss. They will gravitate toward people in their peer group who "get it" and will move away from friends who don't. For example, one teen told the story of realizing she didn't click with her old group of friends because they couldn't understand all she had been through after her father died by suicide. She ended up making a new group of friends. Not all of these friends had a loss in their life, but they had gone through other tough things and understood, on some level, the pain she was in.

Talking Helps

Teens often turn to their friends for support both at home and at school. Some teens will talk openly to their parents, but others will hesitate from doing so. If a teen isn't opening up about their feelings (which is quite normal), caregivers can encourage them to talk to another trusted adult. This may be a teacher, counselor, coach, or another relative. It could even be a friend's parents. Caregivers can also seek outside support for their teen. This may be in the form of a grief support group or a grief camp. The important thing is that the teen knows support is available when they need it.

Tips for Teachers Following a Suicide

Headspace National Youth
Mental Health Foundation

Suicide is a difficult topic to talk about and deal with, particularly after the suicide of a student. Despite this, talking with students about what has happened is a very important step in helping them cope with the trauma and grief associated with suicide. Talking to students and listening to their concerns can also help to highlight students who may be having difficulty coping, and who could benefit from some extra support from school counselors or other professionals.

Teachers can feel uncertain about their role in engaging with students following a suicide. In these times, it is okay to talk about suicide in and outside of the classroom in response to the needs of students. In the classroom, the discussion of suicide may come up at unexpected times and could be seen to take up valuable teaching time. Discussing suicide should not be made into a prohibited topic. Teachers are encouraged to acknowledge what has happened and reiterate that this type of trauma is likely to affect people in different ways. It is important to include messages that outline options to seek help and positive coping in these discussions.

Here are some tips to assist you in both discussing suicide with students and also in knowing when to refer a student to a school counselor or other mental health professional for further support.

DO	DO NOT
Listen to students if they want to talk. It is important for students to feel that they can talk with a trusted adult about how they are feeling or what they are experiencing. By making a student feel listened and supported, they are more likely to be open about their risk and discussing options for accessing further help.	Take on the role of being a counselor. Unless qualified, this is not your role. Students will need your support and understanding following the suicide. However, it is important only professionally trained staff explore and manage more complex and significant issues related to a student's level of distress and ability to cope.
Be empathetic. This is very important in helping students feel supported. It helps demonstrate that you are listening and can reflect some understanding of what the young person is feeling or experiencing. However, it's also important to be aware of clear boundaries and to know when it's time to refer the student on to school counselors.	Do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. If you do not feel comfortable engaging with students on this sensitive subject, ask for assistance from wellbeing staff that are trained in this area.

DO

Maintain normal routine as much as possible.

This is important for both you and your students. Having routine provides some certainty and comfort which is often temporarily lost when any traumatic event occurs. Maintaining routine will also help to minimize students excessively engaging in discussion around the suicide which may increase their distress.

Guide a discussion about suicide if you think it is necessary.

If you notice students are distracted and consumed by the topic of suicide it may be appropriate to facilitate a class discussion about what has occurred. If you deem this as appropriate, it should be time limited to between 5-10 minutes and focus on messages of accessing help, and healthy coping strategies. Additionally, you may need to limit how many conversations of this nature take place. It is also important to try and dispel any rumors circulating about the student's suicide and explain that rumors are likely to increase their own distress.

Be aware of risk factors. Having a basic awareness of risk factors will assist you in being able to identify students who may be at risk. If you are concerned about any students or identify students who you believe to be at risk, it is necessary to refer them to the school counselor. Having an idea of risk factors may also assist in alleviating your anxiety around which students may or may not be at risk.

DO NOT

Guarantee confidentiality to a student if you are concerned about their safety.

If you are concerned about a student you need to communicate this to them as well as letting them know that you will be referring them to the correct staff member. If a student asks you not to disclose any information relating to their safety or another student's safety, you need to inform them that keeping them safe is part of your job and that you are required to pass on this information to the appropriate people. Being transparent with students is essential to maintain their trust and respect.

Allow the whole class time discussion to be focused on suicide.

Whilst you may recognize students' need to discuss the suicide, it is important to contain this to a limited period within class time. Some students may feel the need to discuss the suicide; others may find this more distressing. If you choose to have a class discussion about it, make sure students understand that the next 5-10 minutes will be allocated to this discussion and that the remainder of the class time will be focused on the learning content.

Make assessments or diagnoses. It is not your role to assess or diagnose students. This should only be done by professionals with appropriate training. When discussing a student with the school counselor, it may be most useful to describe changes in their behavior or other observed behaviors.

Youth Suicide

If you believe that a young person is at imminent risk of suicide, you should seek professional support from your local mental health service or emergency department and keep the young person safe until help arrives. Remove any means of suicide available to them in the immediate vicinity, such as medications or weapons. Stay with the young person (or arrange for supervision) until they can be seen or assessed by a professional.

Programs and Services

Braving Grief: Support Groups

Groups aim to foster a safe and supportive space, with a focus on finding personal strength, forming deeper relationships, sharing your story, discovering more meaning in life, and seeing new possibilities. With the goal of promoting peer support and connectivity, support groups work to recognize how grief affects our minds and our bodies. Trained facilitators guide groups through meaningful discussion and activities. Each activity helps participants learn healthy coping skills, and create rituals to honor their loved ones who have died.

Groups are open to adults, and to children ages 5 and older.

Multiple grief group sessions are held throughout the year, with meetings held one night each week for six weeks. Every support group includes dinner followed by small group activities based on age and type of loss to facilitate discussion and sharing. Virtual options may also be available.

Childcare is available upon request for children younger than kindergarten. Registration is required.

School-Based Support

Studies show that roughly 1 in 14 school-aged children will lose a parent, and 1 in 5 will lose someone close to them. Feelings of grief and loss can also stem from divorce, abandonment, incarceration, and other traumatic events.

Since 2018, EveryStep's Amanda the Panda program has provided on-site programming at more than 30 Iowa schools to support children experiencing grief and loss. Throughout each 6-week session, students share their grief stories, connect with peers and learn resiliency skills to feel better equipped to cope with grief in healthy ways.

Each child's grief is personal and unique. Our staff are trained to assist with the complexity of what it means to experience grief and loss at a young age.

By giving kids healthy coping skills and tools to address their grief, we can help them down a path that leads to healing, positive relationships with others, and success at school. Our group-based approach provides the necessary amount of support for most kids, while allowing our staff to identify kids who need a higher level of support.

Cheer Box

The holidays can be extremely difficult the first year after the death of a loved one. Each year, hundreds of volunteers assemble and deliver Cheer Boxes, filled with 12 meaningful gifts that give individuals and families the opportunity to come together and honor their loved one. Nominations for recipients can be made year-round by visiting our website.

Community Support

Many times we experience grief as a community. Maybe your organization or workplace has lost a member of its team, or your town is suffering the loss of a special individual. We offer support to groups and entire communities through our Day of Hope and Healing and with other programs tailored to the needs of the community. Activities help residents heal after tragedy and promote healing for losses that may not fit within our traditional support groups.

Supplemental Programming

Ranging from dinner club gatherings for young adults, to opportunities to attend local events, Amanda the Panda engages participants in activities that promote socialization and help individuals, children, and families rebuild after the death of a loved one.

For volunteer opportunities or to register for programs, visit everystep.org or call us at (515) 223-4847.

Our Hospice Offices

Centerville

(641) 856-5502
(800) 500-2614

Des Moines

(515) 333-5810

Mount Ayr

(641) 464-2088
(888) 464-7222

Mount Pleasant

(319) 385-4472
(888) 385-4472

Winterset (515)

462-5205 (877)
642-2888

Our Hospice House

Kavanagh House

900 56th Street, Des Moines
(515) 255-0857

Amanda the Panda

Grief & Loss Services for Adults, Teens and Children

(515) 223-4847
(877) 533-4847



Grief & Loss Services

Home of Amanda the Panda

everystep.org