



Helping Children **Cope with Grief**

Everyone responds to death and loss in their own way. If your family is experiencing a loss, how your children respond or behave may depend on their age, and how you respond can help them manage grief appropriately. We can't take their pain away, but we can provide healthy ways to cope. Some ways to help make that happen include:

- **Keep schedules and routines as predictable as possible.** Children thrive on routine and the more you can keep things as normal as possible, the easier it is for your child to cope. It is important for your child to understand

that there's room to grieve, but there's also room to live their lives.

- **Encourage children to express their feelings.** Some children might act out in anger and may be upset at the person who has died or any person around them. Some children might withdraw and cry, while others may act as if nothing ever happened. It's hard to know how a child might respond, but it is important to help them acknowledge and express their feelings. Start a conversation by reading developmentally appropriate books about

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death and grief. For an older child or adolescent who may not want to talk, allow them to grieve and let them know you're there to talk if they need to. Encourage them to share their feelings with others and respect their need for space.

- **Talk about the loved one.** It's okay to talk about the person or beloved family member, including a pet. Resist the urge to remove pictures or items immediately. Look at old pictures, tell stories, or draw pictures since many young children are not yet able to express their feelings in words. This teaches children that it's okay to remember their loved one and sharing stories is a natural part of grieving.
- **Be direct but keep it minimal.** Your child may have questions about death or the afterlife. Do your best to answer honestly but keep it simple. Too much information can be overwhelming for any child. It is also important to avoid euphemisms as this can be more confusing for a child. Avoid phrases such as a loved one "went to sleep" as this creates more confusion and fear about their own behaviors. For young children who cannot grasp the permanence of death, they might think a loved one may "wake up."
- **Take care of yourself.** It's easy to forget about your own grief when you are worried about your children. Children imitate and learn how to manage their grief by watching their parents. It is important to show your children



that feeling sad or upset is normal. But we want to show them effective ways to deal with that sadness instead of lashing out or withdrawing from daily living. Hiding your own grief can make children feel confused or bad about their own emotions. They may also worry about losing you. Give them reassurance that you're grieving too but show them that you're coping in a healthy way.

- **Get professional help. Grieving takes time.** If you or your child has difficulty overcoming feelings of grief after six months or symptoms are getting in the way of moving forward, it might be time to seek professional help. Contact your child's pediatrician or contact a therapist for more support.

➡ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.

