

Preschoolers and Grief



A guide to helping
preschool age children
cope with grief


Kids Path[®]

Caring for Children Coping with Illness or Loss



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Preschool Age Children and Grief

Do very young children grieve?

Yes. Grief is a natural response to losing something we love, care about or count on. Anyone old enough to care about something is old enough to grieve.

How do I talk to a young child about illness and death?

Be concrete and tell the truth. Give the child the opportunity to talk about death. Let her ask questions when she feels comfortable doing so.

Preschool age children are not able to understand the permanence of death. They may view the loss as a temporary separation and ask when their loved one will return or if they can go visit them. Consistent and honest discussions will help children slowly discover the meaning of death and the impact it has on their life.

Don't use language that confuses young children such as "Death is like being asleep" or "We lost your grandmother last night." Your saying the words "dead" and "died" will reinforce the reality of the loss and will gradually help the child understand the overall concept of death. Preschool age children rarely have the words to express their grief. Adults can help a child by answering their questions about loss in a gentle, concrete way. Answering questions provides a safe place where the child can express his or her feelings.

When a child asks you a question, only answer *that* question. That may be all the child wants to know or is capable of hearing at that time. Try to incorporate as many feeling words as possible into your answer. (i.e. "I am sad that grandma died, and when I feel sad, it helps me to cry.")

How to Help a Young Child Cope With Loss

Maintain Routines

Keeping your family's routine as normal as possible can help the child feel more secure and in control. Surround your child with people she knows best and feels most comfortable with.

Express Your Own Feelings

Young children may not understand the permanence or concept of death but they do understand feelings. You can be a great role model to your child and encourage the healthy expression of feelings by expressing your own feelings and letting the child know it is okay to be sad. Acknowledge any fears that death may have created for the young child, such as being separated from loved ones. Be reassuring and patient with her. That will help him or her regain a sense of security in the world.

People of all ages grieve at their own pace. Be patient and understanding if your child is not ready to express his or her feelings at the same time you are. Providing a nurturing and safe environment will allow the child a space to express herself when she is ready to do so.

Regression

Young children may regress in their own behaviors after they have experienced a loss or major disruption in routine due to illness or death. For instance, when a parent is undergoing intense treatment for cancer, the child may react to the illness and changes at home by beginning to wet her bed again. Another child may begin to suck her thumb again after the death of a grandparent. These behaviors are often temporary and are a way for a child to fulfill an increased need for reassurance and comfort.

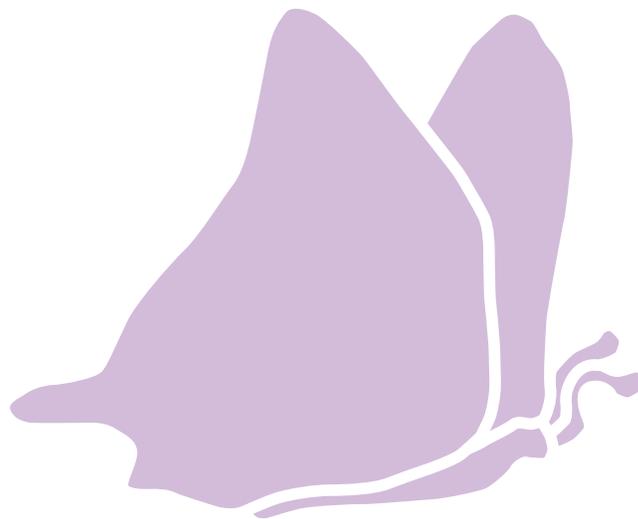
Take Grief Seriously

Often, a young child's first experience with death is through the loss of a pet. Encourage the child to talk about the feelings they have related to this loss. Use this opportunity to explore any questions a child may have about death and dying. Take time to answer questions honestly and be prepared to accept any tears or expressions of anger over the loss.

Taking Your Young Child to the Funeral

We recommend giving children a choice about whether or not they would like to attend any part of your family's memorial rituals. You know your child better than anyone, so this decision is yours to make. To help your child decide about attending, give him or her as much information as possible about what the event will be like. Explain where it will occur, what it will look like, who will be there, how people will be reacting, etc. If your young child chooses to attend, designate someone the child trusts and is comfortable with, who is willing to leave with your child

if at any point he or she decides not to attend the service. If your young child chooses not to attend, encourage him or her to participate indirectly by drawing a picture, writing a letter that may be placed in the casket, helping you choose music or a special poem for the service or another small way you agree on. Saying "goodbye" is important for people of all ages.



Grief Resources Available for You and Your Child

Kids Path is the specialized children's program of Hospice and Palliative Care of Greensboro (HPCG). Kids Path offers grief counseling to any child in the community impacted by the illness or death of a loved one. Grief counselors use play therapy and other interventions to help support grieving children and teens ages 4 through 18 following a loss. Please call 336.544.5437 to find out how Kids Path can support you and your child or to learn more about available services.

Kids Path maintains a lending library with books for children of all ages. Some titles that may be appropriate for preschool-age children are "When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death" by Laurie and Marc Brown and "I Miss You: A First Look at Death" by Pat Thomas.

You are welcome to check out and borrow these helpful and informative books and read them to your children at home. Please stop by our office to learn more about this service and to discover the many other resources available to you in our lending library.

You may also want to explore the following websites to learn more about how to support a child who is grieving.

We recommend:

www.dougy.org

www.griefnet.org

www.griefwatch.com

www.hospicenet.org

Children need to feel safe expressing their grief. You can provide a nurturing environment for them through listening and acceptance. From silliness to sadness, any feeling is okay.

Surrounding the child with caring and patient adults will help them regain a sense of security in their world.

Kids Path is a specialized program for children offered by
Hospice and Palliative Care of Greensboro.



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