

When a Friend Dies

An evidence-based guide for parents helping children and teens grieve the death of a friend.

The Invisible Grief: Why Peer Loss Is Overlooked

When a child dies, support naturally goes to the family. But there is another circle of mourners who are often completely overlooked — the child's friends.

A 2025 narrative review in *Psychology Research and Behavior Management* found that "grief following peer loss is often unrecognized and unsupported by society, making it difficult for adolescents to handle their grief." This lack of recognition results in "prolonged and intense reactions, negatively affecting academic performance and physical and mental health."

Peer loss grief has been documented to last up to 8.5 years, with symptoms including PTSD and sleep disturbances. Yet because mourners are "just friends" rather than family, their grief is frequently dismissed.

For children and adolescents, friends are the center of their social world. Losing a best friend is a seismic disruption to their sense of safety and belonging.

Source: *Psychology Research and Behavior Management* — The Grief of Peer Loss Among Adolescents (2025). <https://www.dovepress.com>

How Peer Grief Manifests

Children who lose a friend experience "disenfranchised grief" — grief not socially recognized as legitimate. They may not receive sympathy cards, may not be excused from school, and adults quickly expect them to "move on."

Shock and disbelief.

Children are not supposed to die. When a friend dies suddenly, it shatters the assumption that the world is safe.

Survivor's guilt.

"Why them and not me?" "If I had been there, maybe it wouldn't have happened." Guilt requires direct, compassionate rebuttal from trusted adults.

Anger.

At the friend for dying, at the universe for being unfair, at classmates who don't seem to care enough.

Academic decline.

School — where they saw their friend every day — may become unbearable.

Sleep disturbances.

Nightmares and insomnia can persist for months or years without intervention.

Girls tend to exhibit more complicated grief reactions and longer duration of grief compared to boys.

Source: Psychology Research and Behavior Management — Peer Loss (2025). <https://www.dovepress.com>

Source: Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma (PMC) — Developmental Manifestations of Grief. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8794619/>

What Parents Can Do

Validate their grief.

Do not say "you'll make new friends" or "at least it wasn't family." Instead: "I know how much [name] meant to you. This is a terrible loss."

Open the door but do not force it.

"If you want to talk, I am here. There is no rush." Follow their lead.

Maintain routines with flexibility.

Keep normalcy but allow compassion — a child who cannot face school the day after a funeral may need a day home.

Help them honor the friend.

Attending the memorial, writing in a memory book, or gathering with mutual friends to share stories.

Connect with the school.

Notify teachers and counselors for additional support and accommodations.

Watch for contagion effects.

If the friend died by suicide, be especially vigilant for signs of hopelessness or preoccupation with death. Seek professional help immediately if these appear.

Source: APA — Evidence-Based Practices for Childhood Grief and Trauma (2022).

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/evidence-based-practices-grief>

Evidence-Based Interventions

Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT):

Helps children manage trauma reactions, create "trauma narratives," and develop coping skills. Identified by the APA as effective for childhood grief.

Multidimensional Grief Therapy:

Recognizes grief across three domains — separation distress, existential distress, and circumstance-related distress — with targeted strategies for each.

Peer Support Programs:

Research on TAPS Good Grief Camps found participants reported fewer complicated grief symptoms and more post-traumatic growth.

Resilient Parenting for Bereaved Families:

Strengthens family cohesion through caregiver listening skills, open communication, and structured bonding time.

Source: APA — Evidence-Based Practices (2022). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/evidence-based-practices-grief>

Source: University of Pittsburgh — Pediatric Grief Study. <https://www.psychiatry.pitt.edu>

Long-Term Impact

The University of Pittsburgh conducted the longest pediatric grief study to date, finding bereaved children are more than twice as likely to show impairments at school and home — even seven years later.

Bereaved children showed higher rates of depression (first two years), higher PTSD at all time points, and "subthreshold symptoms that do not meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder can also profoundly affect quality of life."

Children younger than 12 at the time of loss were more vulnerable to depression than adolescents.

The most critical finding: early professional awareness, targeted intervention, and effective social support are the three factors most consistently associated with positive long-term outcomes.

Source: University of Pittsburgh — Pediatric Grief Study. <https://www.psychiatry.pitt.edu>
