

Grief & Children

How children grieve at every age — and how to help them.

EVIDENCE-BASED

Children grieve differently than adults

Children may not cry or appear sad in ways you expect. They often grieve in bursts — playing happily one moment, then asking a profound question about death the next. This is developmentally normal.

Ages 0-3: Infants & Toddlers

Cannot understand death but sense the absence of a caregiver and emotional distress around them. May become fussier, clingy, or have disrupted sleep and eating.

- Maintain routines as much as possible
- Offer extra physical comfort and soothing
- Incorporate comforting rituals the deceased used

Ages 3-5: Preschool

Believe death is temporary (like sleeping). May ask “when is Grandma coming back?” repeatedly. Can believe they caused the death through their thoughts.

- Use clear language: “died” not “passed away” or “went to sleep”
- Reassure them the death was not their fault
- Offer choices to give them a sense of control

Ages 5-8: Early Elementary

Concrete thinkers beginning to understand death is permanent. May worry about other loved ones dying and express grief through physical complaints.

- Answer questions honestly and simply
- Normalize their feelings — anger, sadness, fear are all okay
- Maintain school routines when possible

Ages 9-12: Preteens

Can understand death abstractly but may struggle with expressing emotions. May feel different from peers and try to hide their grief.

- Provide variety: art, writing, physical activity, conversation
- Help them identify people they feel safe talking to
- Be flexible with rules while maintaining structure

Ages 13-18: Teenagers

Understand death fully but are simultaneously navigating identity formation. May turn to peers over family. Watch for risk-taking behavior.

- Respect their need for privacy while staying available
- Encourage creative outlets: journaling, music, art
- Monitor high-risk behavior; set limits with compassion
- Consider peer grief support groups

Sources: Dougy Center, <https://www.dougy.org/assets/uploads/Developmental-Responses-to-Grief-ages-2-18.pdf>; Eluna Network, <https://elunanetwork.org/resources/developmental-grief-responses/>; PMC (2022), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8794619/>

What to Say (and What Not to Say)

Helpful:

- "It's okay to be sad. I'm sad too."
- "You didn't do anything to cause this."
- "I don't know the answer, but we can figure it out together."
- "It's okay to play and have fun. That doesn't mean you don't miss them."

Avoid:

- "They went to sleep" (children may become afraid of sleeping)
- "God needed them in heaven" (children may feel angry at God or afraid God will "need" them too)
- "You need to be strong for your family" (gives children permission to suppress grief)
- "At least they're not in pain anymore" (minimizes the child's loss)

If you need someone to talk to right now:

NHPCO Grief Support: 1-800-658-8898 | 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988