



Grief Programs and Services for Children, Teens, and Families

Transitions GriefCare provides compassionate grief support services to children, adolescents, and families who are coping with the illness or death of a family member, friend, or loved one. Our programs provide opportunities for:

- expressing feelings, identifying coping skills, building memories, and finding healing in a safe place.
- taking part in grief-related activities through talking, music, art, and games.
- connecting with other kids and families with similar losses.

Transitions GriefCare services are open to anyone in the community, regardless of whether that family was served by Transitions LifeCare. These services are offered at no cost, though donations are gratefully accepted to allow us to continue to offer support to grieving families.

Individual and Family Grief Counseling

- Short-term individual grief counseling for children and teens.
- Short-term family counseling designed to help family members understand and accept one another's grief while identifying ways to support one another.

Grief Workshops

- Workshop topics based on specific areas of grief (e.g., anger, coping, ways to stay connected).
- Connect grieving children and teens with grieving peers.
- Incorporate variety of creative materials, such as games, art, and grief projects.

Camp Reflections

- A day program in a camp-like setting with small and large group activities.
- Programming for adults in the family available during camp.

Online and Video Resources at transitionslifecare.org/teens#resources

- Videos to help support children and teens who are coping with the progression of a loved one's illness or needing support after the death has occurred.
- Printable resources, such as family activities and talking tips.

Lending Library

- Books and other grief- and loss-related materials for children, teens, and adults may be checked out for a two-week lending period.

Special Workshops and Events

- Offered periodically throughout the year.
- May be customized to meet specific community or organization needs.
- Examples include: support for holiday grief in the family, expressing children's grief through music, exploring grief through creative shadowboxes.

"Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope" Puppet Program

- A 60-minute school-based educational puppet show and facilitated discussion for 3rd graders focusing on loss, grief, and being a caring friend.

"I've learned something to do if I'm angry, sad, lonely, and upset, and I've learned I'm never alone."
—Middle Schooler

Grieving children experience many of the same thoughts and feelings as grieving adults. However, children's grief may look very different than adult grief.

Grieving children express and work through their grief in different ways. Grief can be expressed...

- when something triggers grief or when children feel safe enough to show their grief.
- in brief, but intense, episodes.
- through action and play instead of words.

A child's grief reflects their current level of development and is unique to that child.

- Children continue to understand their loss in new ways. They grieve again and again throughout their lives and at each developmental milestone or life transition (e.g., beginning middle school, major life moments or celebrations such as weddings or special accomplishments).
- Everyone is unique in their grief. Don't compare your child to other grieving children, or even compare siblings to each other.
- Temporary regression to earlier behaviors is normal (e.g., bed wetting, thumb sucking, clinging behaviors).

"It's OK to cry and I'm not the only one alone."

–Teen

What Grieving Children Think, Feel, and Do

Thoughts

- Confusion
- Feeling in a fog
- Racing thoughts
- Preoccupied with deceased
- Forgetfulness
- Hard time concentrating
- Wondering, "Why?"
- Asking, "What did I do to cause this?"

Feelings

- Sadness, deep sorrow
- Fears (of separation, death, others dying)
- Anger, irritability, frustration
- Anxiety, insecurity
- Longing, loneliness, alienation
- Jealousy of others
- Guilt, regret
- Shock
- Powerlessness, helplessness
- Shame (at being different from peers)
- Relief

Physical Reactions

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Dizziness
- Rapid heart beat
- Tiredness
- Shortness of breath
- Sweat
- Restlessness
- Tightness in chest
- Nightmares

Behaviors

- Play
- Cry
- Cling, sigh
- Dream, journal
- Hide feelings
- Act differently, carelessly
- Act out
- Sleep or eat more or less
- Withdraw
- Fight more with family/friends
- Improvement or drop in grades

Infants and Toddlers (newborn–3 years)

Child's Perception

Infants and toddlers can sense different moods (e.g., anxiety, sadness) of adults around them.

- Do grieve loss of a loved one
- May be irritable and fussy
- Show grief reactions through changes in eating, sleeping, bowel and bladder patterns
- Rely on physical nurturance and affection to feel safe

Providing Support

- Keep routines the same to maintain consistency
- Use reassuring words; give hugs and comforting physical affection; hold child in your arms more
- Talk to child about the death; use words "die" and "dead" to explain death, not "sleeping" or "on a trip"
- Enlist help to care for child when you are grieving intensely
- Infant's room/crib should be a calm and soothing place

Early Childhood (3–6 years)

Child's Perception

They think death is reversible; may not understand concept of person "never" returning or permanence of death.

- Sadness expressed for short periods of time
- May revert back to thumb sucking, bed wetting, etc.
- Acts out feelings through play, dreams, body aches
- Increased aggression and anger
- Worries how deceased breathes, eats, etc.
- Magical thinking (may think caused the death)
- Asks same questions over and over again
- Talking about feelings difficult
- Frequent complaints about body aches

Providing Support

- Keep routines the same
- Draw and play together; read books on death and loss
- Help child name what they fear
- Help child to understand range of feelings
- Use concrete, simple language when discussing death (e.g., death, die, dead)
- Make sure child does not feel responsible for the death; clarify it is not their fault
- Avoid cliches when talking about death (e.g., "she's in a better place," "God wanted her in heaven," etc.)
- Answer questions simply and accurately
- Repeat answers to same-asked questions

Middle Childhood (6–9 years)

Child's Perception

They begin to understand finality of death and the range of feelings and changes in grief.

- Asks specific questions about the death
- Wonders about safety, who will take care of them
- Fear of death, fear of being abandoned
- Unfamiliar feelings of guilt, regret, jealousy present
- Increased aggression and anger
- Begins to explore faith; may question spirituality

Providing Support

- Talk with child about their feelings
- Explore questions of faith
- Make sure child does not feel responsible for the death
- Answer questions about the cause of death or illness
- Identify specific fears
- Encourage anger release in safe ways (ripping newspaper, popping bubble wrap, silent scream)
- Share positive memories of deceased

Adapted by Transitions GriefCare from School Psychologist's Corner of the Anglo-American School (AAS) website <http://www.aas.ru>

Late Childhood/Early Adolescence (9–13 years)

Child's Perception

They understand the permanence of death; death may be seen as a punishment for wrongdoings in the past; they begin to reflect on **meaning** the death will have.

- Concerned how their world will change; contemplates future without loved one
- Wants to be independent, but guidance of adults crucial
- May have delayed grief reactions
- Withdrawal from others and activities common
- Schoolwork may be affected
- Interested in ways to stay connected to the deceased
- Wonders about "how" and "why" of death
- Concerns about being different from peers
- Increased anger and guilt feelings and episodes of acting out
- Feels self-conscious about their grief

Providing Support

- Encourage discussion about their grief thoughts and feelings
- Encourage drawing/writing; participation in sports or physical activities
- Encourage anger release in safe ways (ripping newspaper, popping bubble wrap, silent scream)
- Do not let child take over adult responsibilities (being caregiver for family members, worrying about finances, etc.)
- Allow information seeking about the death, the person who died, or grief
- Avoid cliches when talking about death (e.g., "she's in a better place," "God wanted her in heaven")
- Be honest about how the person died and answer questions directly

Adolescence/Teen (13–18 years)

Adolescent's Perception

They have a concrete understanding about death; questions **meaning** the death will have

- Death is viewed as unfair, an unwelcome interruption of one's life
- Bodily changes magnify grief
- May need permission to grieve
- Feels concerned about being "different" from peers
- Increased risk-taking/testing own mortality
- May reflect on and/or glorify death
- May act indifferent or as if nothing is bothering them
- May turn to drugs/alcohol for relief
- May experience sense of denial that the death occurred or feeling of shock

Providing Support

- Provide gentle, consistent support, even if they say "no"
- Be available, but don't push them to talk
- Help them find peers who are supportive
- Find other trusted adults they can talk with, such as a counselor, spiritual leader, or mentor
- Assist in relieving burden of adult responsibilities
- Work together on impulse control to reduce reckless behavior
- De-romanticize death by talking about permanence and realities of death
- Discuss feelings of helplessness
- Avoid cliches when talking about death (e.g., "she's in a better place," "God wanted her in heaven")

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Hints on How to Talk With a Grieving Child

- **Listen with empathy:** stop what you are doing, look at the child, listen.
- **Don't interrupt:** let the child control the conversation.
- **Keep it open:** say, "I see," "Tell me more," "Tell me about that," "I wonder."
- **Acknowledge the feelings you are hearing:** say, "It sounds to me like you are feeling..."
- **Use the words "dead," "died," etc.:** instead of euphemisms such as "passed away," "she's sleeping," or "she's living with the angels." These statements can often be confusing for children.

A Few Examples

Will Grandpa ever move again?

"No. Dying means his body has stopped working. When someone dies, they no longer need to eat, sleep, breathe, or move anymore. They also don't feel pain, get hungry, or feel hot or cold."

Find examples of death in the natural world, such as dead bugs or animals, to explain differences between being alive and dead to children.

Why can't they fix him?

"Once the body dies and it stops working, it can't start again."

Why is she cold?

"Her heart has stopped beating. The body only stays warm when it's living because the heart pumps blood to keep our bodies warm and to keep them healthy and alive. When people die, their hearts stop beating, so they feel cold to us, but the dead person doesn't feel the coldness."

When will he come back?

"He won't come back. People who die don't come back to life."

Is she sleeping?

"No. When we sleep our body is still working, just resting, and we can still wake up. Dying is not like sleeping."

"It's OK to
be angry."
-8-year-old

How You Can Help Your Child

Help the Child Feel Safe Again

- Present a sense of calm to your child by conveying hope that your family will, in time, find healing.
- Avoid creating too many changes (e.g., changing homes, rooms, schools, schedules, etc.) at once. Sometimes it may feel like this is an easier way to cope, but ultimately it may create too much instability when already so much has changed.
- Maintain familiar routines, like continuing regular bedtimes and eating dinner together.
- Continue setting limits and rules and upholding discipline. Limits and discipline help children to feel safe and know what to expect.
- Truly listen to your child without correcting or judging what he or she says.

Help the Child Understand Death

- Provide accurate, concrete information about death using language the child will understand.
 - For example, some children may not understand what “cancer” or a “heart attack” is, so helping a child understand death may involve explaining ideas at this level. If appropriate, clarify that the illness is not “catching.”
 - Use the words “dead” and “died.” Euphemisms (e.g., “she’s sleeping,” “God wanted her,” “he’s on a trip,” etc.) may be confusing.
 - Be sure to communicate that dying means the body stops working, and that the person doesn’t feel pain or need to eat or sleep anymore. Clarify that the person won’t be coming back.
 - Be prepared to answer the same question over and over- and be consistent with your answer.
 - Do not try to distract the child from their grief. Feeling sad is normal and OK! Expressing grief feelings and thoughts is healthy and essential to grieving constructively.
 - Let the child know that the death is not their fault.

“I learned good ways to help my feelings.”

–5-year-old

Help the Child Actively Mourn

- Be an example of healthy grieving for your child. Take care of yourself and express, share about, and find healing in your own grief, in addition to your child’s.
- Let them (and yourself) cry and reinforce that crying is a healthy behavior.
- Encourage grieving through play (puppets, make believe), active play (sports, running), and/or art (drawing, poetry).
- Allow the child to tell their story of what happened, often again and again.
- Allow for some private activities and rest time.
- Engage the child in safe anger release (tearing up paper/magazines, stomp rockets, silent screaming, etc.).

Help the Child Stay Connected to the Deceased

- Discuss spiritual beliefs with children. Talk with your children about what they believe about the afterlife and what happened to the person who died.
- Create meaningful family rituals, such as doing an activity your loved one liked to do, with input from your child.
- Share memories and stories together as a family. Make scrapbooks and photo albums of your memories together.
- Find ways to remember the deceased on special days (birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, let the child choose a day).

Let the Child Be a Child

- Don’t allow your child to take on responsibilities beyond their age, such as worrying about bills or money or becoming a major caregiver to family members. Let them know that you are taking care of things.
- Laugh and play; help your child find the “good” side of life again.

General Grief & Loss Resources

- *When Someone Very Special Dies* Marge Heegaard
- *I Miss You* Pat Thomas
- *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?* Trevor Romain
- *When Dinosaurs Die* Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown
- *Help Me Say Goodbye* Janis Silverman
- *Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Dealing with Loss* Michaelene Mundy
- *The Invisible String* Patrice Karst
- *Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope* Donna O'Toole
- *When Someone Dies* Sharon Greenlee
- *Lost and Found* Rabbi Mark Gellman and Monsignor Thomas Hartman
- *Always & Forever* Alan Durant and Debi Gliori
- *Where Are You? A Child's Book About Loss* Laura Olivieri
- *I Know I Made It Happen* Lynn Bennett Blackburn
- *Death is Stupid* Anastasia Higginbotham

Spirituality, Heaven, & Faith

- *What's Heaven?* Maria Shriver
- *The Next Place* Warren Hanson

Loss of a Parent

- *After Charlotte's Mom Died* Mark Scrivani
- *Sunflowers and Rainbows for Tia* Alesia Alexander-Greene
- *I Heard Your Mommy Died* Mark Scrivani
- *Sam's Dad Died* Margaret Holmes
- *Molly's Mom Died* Margaret Holmes
- *A Quilt for Elizabeth* B. W. Tiffault
- *Our Dad Died: The True Story of Three Kids Whose Lives Changed* Amy, Allie, and David Dennison
- *Geranium Morning* E. Sandy Powell
- *When My Mommy Died* Janice M. Hammond
- *Daddy's Promise* Cindy Klein Cohen and John T. Heiney
- *Always By My Side* Susan Kerner
- *The Scar* Charlotte Moundlic

Loss of a Sibling

- *Isabelle's Dream: A Story and Activity Book for a Child's Grief Journey* Betsy Arenella
- *Mick Harte Was Here* Barbara Park
- *A Little Bit of Rob* Barbara Turner
- *Thumpy's Story: A Story of Love and Grief Shared*
- *When I Die, Will I Get Better?* Joeri and Piet Breebaart
- *My Brother Joey Died* Gloria Houston-McLendon
- *Mama Mockingbird* Sauni Wood
- *Lost and Found: Remembering a Sister* Ellen Yeomans
- *A Summer to Die* Lois Lowry
- *Why Did She Have to Die?* Lurlene McDaniel
- *A Birthday Present for Daniel* Juliet Rothman

Loss of an Infant Sibling, Stillbirth, or Miscarriage

- *Where's Jess?* Joy and Marv Johnson [infant loss]
- *Dancing on the Moon* Janice Roper
- *Remembering Our Baby* Patti Keough [workbook for loss of sibling prior to birth]
- *No New Baby* Marilyn Gryte [infant loss] (available in Spanish, *No Bebe Neuvo*)
- *Molly's Rosebush* Janice Cohn [miscarriage]
- *We Were Gonna Have a Baby, But We Had an Angel Instead* Pat Schwiebert [miscarriage/stillbirth]

Loss of Grandparents

- *Grandad Bill's Song* Jane Yolen
- *Animal Crackers: A Tender Book About Death & Funerals & Love* Bridget Marshall
- *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* Tomie dePaola
- *Now One Foot, Now the Other* Tomie dePaola (available in Spanish, *Un Pasito ... Y Otro Pasito*)
- *I Miss You* Pat Thomas
- *Where's Grandpa?* T.A. Barron

Loss of a Friend

- *I Had a Friend Named Peter* Janice Cohen
- *If Nathan Were Here* M. Bahr
- *Sadako and The Thousand Paper Cranes* Eleanor Coer
- *When A Friend Dies* Marilyn Gootman
- *Bridge to Terabithia* Katherine Patterson
- *Goodbye Rune* Marit Kaldhol
- *Nicholas* Jane Emborsky

Loss of a Pet

- *It Must Hurt A Lot* Doris Sanford
- *Dog Heaven* Cynthia Rylant
- *Cat Heaven* Cynthia Rylant
- *The Accident* Carol Carrick
- *I'll Always Love You* Hans Wilhelm
- *The Legend of Rainbow Bridge* William Brinton
- *The Dead Bird* Margaret Wise Brown

Cancer & Illness

- *Someone I Love is Sick* Kathleen McCue
- *On the Wings of a Butterfly: A Story About Life and Death* Marilyn Maple
- *The Hope Tree: Kids Talk About Breast Cancer* Laura Numeroff and Wendy Schlessel Harpham
- *Mommy Has to Stay in Bed* Annette Rivlin-Gutman

Accidental Death

- *Geranium Morning* E. Sandy Powell
- *Goodbye Rune* Marit Kaldhol and Wenche Oyen
- *When Something Terrible Happens: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief* Marge Heegaard
- *Bridge to Terabithia* Katherine Patterson

Suicide Loss

- *After a Suicide: Workbook for Grieving Kids* The Dougy Center
- *But I Didn't Say Goodbye: Helping Children and Families After a Suicide* Barbara Rubel
- *Why Would Someone Want to Die?* Rebecca C. Schmidt
- *Someone I Love Died by Suicide: A Story for Child Survivors and Those Who Care for Them* Doreen T. Cammarata
- *After Suicide: Living with the Questions* Eileen Keuhn [teens]
- *Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide: Or Even Starts Talking About It* Earl Grollman and Max Malikov

Violent Death

- *When Something Terrible Happens: Children Can Learn to Cope With Grief* Marge Heegaard
- *Why Did It Happen?: Helping Children Cope In a Violent World* Janice Cohn
- *After a Murder: A Workbook for Grieving Kids* The Dougy Center
- *Reactions* Alison Salloum [workbook]
- *When Someone You Know Has Been Killed* Jay Schleifer
- *A Terrible Thing Happened* M. Holmes et al

Resources for Teens

- ***Part of Me Died Too: Stories of Creative Survival Among Bereaved Children and Teenagers*** Virginia Lynn Frye
- ***Tear Soup*** Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen
- ***Chill & Spill: A Place to Put it Down & Work it Out*** Steffanie Lorig and Jeanean Jacobs
- ***Coping With the Death of a Brother or Sister*** Ruth Ann Ruiz
- ***Facing Change: Coming Together and Falling Apart in the Teen Years*** Donna O'Toole
- ***When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens*** Bev Cobain
- ***Fighting Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens*** Earl Hipp
- ***Recovering from the Loss of a Sibling*** Katherine Donnelly
- ***The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends*** Helen Fitzgerald
- ***Saying Goodbye When You Don't Want to: Teens Dealing with Loss*** Martha Bolton
- ***Motherless Daughters*** Hope Edelman
- ***Help for the Hard Times*** Earl Hipp
- ***You Are Not Alone*** Lynne Hughes
- ***Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*** Earl Grollman
- ***How It Feels When a Parent Dies*** Jill Kremenz

Resources for Parents & Caregivers

- ***Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies*** Theresa Huntley
- ***The Grieving Child*** Helen Fitzgerald
- ***Guiding Your Child Through Grief*** James and Mary Ann Emswiler
- ***Helping Children Cope With Grief*** Rosemary Wells
- ***Talking About Death*** Earl Grollman
- ***When Bad Things Happen To Good People*** Harold Kushner
- ***Why Did Daddy Die? Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Parent*** Linda Alderman
- ***The Bereaved Parent*** Harriet Schiff
- ***For the Grieving Child: An Activities Manual*** Suzan Jaffe

Feelings

- ***Guess How Much I Love You*** Sue McBratney
- ***Love You Forever*** Robert Munsch
- ***Today I Feel Silly and Other Moods That Make My Day*** Jamie Lee Curtis
- ***How Full is Your Bucket?*** Tom Rath and Mary Reckmeyer
- ***The Hurt*** Teddi Doleski
- ***When I Feel Angry*** Cornelia Maude Spelman
- ***When I Feel Sad*** Cornelia Maude Spelman
- ***Cool Down and Work Through Anger*** Cheri J. Meiners
- ***The Way I Feel*** Janan Cain
- ***How Are You Peeling? Foods with Moods*** Saxton Freymann and Joost Elffers