



Supporting Grieving Kids and Teenagers

Family members, friends and caregivers who are helping a child to understand and grieve – when they themselves are also grieving – often feel overwhelmed and helpless. Despite these feelings, you can help. When a loved one has died, we may wish we could “fix” the situation or prevent children from suffering. But we can best support kids in their struggle to live with and make sense of what is happening by talking with them frequently about their experience and including them in the family’s grieving.

Children feel stronger knowing they can share their thoughts, questions, and concerns with loving and supportive adults. They need to know that there are no wrong or bad feelings or thoughts, and that they don’t have to “be strong” or “hold it together.” Explain that it is common to feel a range of emotions and it is important to share them. Encourage healthy ways for kids to express their feelings such as through sports, art, crafts, music, dancing, writing, or talking to someone they trust.

Why might sometimes be more difficult than others?

After a family member or a loved one has died, the grief that children and teenagers experience will change over time. Some days are harder than others, for kids just as they are for adults, no matter how much time has passed since the death. Special days like birthdays, anniversaries, winter holidays, graduations, or other special or important days can be especially difficult, stirring up feelings of grief for the whole family. Even though these days may be difficult, they also offer important and meaningful opportunities for family members to remember the person who died, to be together, to share their memories, their feelings and to support one another.

We hope that this handout will support discussion in the family about what you and your child are thinking and feeling.

What every family should know about grief

Many people in our society feel uncomfortable talking about death and grief as it involves many hard emotions and because many people are afraid of dying. It is however a natural thing to wonder about illness, death and grief and to have many questions. Talking about these things can help us to understand important facts of life better and to know that we are not alone in our wonderings and worries, even if we can’t find answers to all of our questions. Here are some things to think and talk about together:



- Grief is a normal and natural process following a loss. Although we usually think of grief as a response to the death of a family member, friend or pet, it is also natural to grieve because of a serious illness or injury, divorce or separation, being bullied or hurt, moving, losing something important.
- Sometimes people think of grief as being sadness, but it involves **all kinds of feelings**, including anger, guilt, worry, numbness, relief, etc. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but people run into trouble if they try not to grieve at all.
- It can be hard to feel all the feelings that grief brings. This is partly because of just how strong and complex these feelings can be, but can be even harder because people in this society are often very shy or embarrassed about their feelings, and feel uncomfortable (ashamed, “weak”) sharing them.
- Being tough is rarely as helpful or healthy as people often think - bringing our experiences and feelings out into the open and caring for ourselves and each other is one of the best things about being human.

It is important to talk about grief, so you can recognize it when it happens, and so you don't feel helpless when it is happening to you or someone around you.

How can grief impact us?

Grief can feel different at different times and for different people, even people in the same family. This is natural since each person is unique, with a unique relationship to the person who died. Some things that a person might notice include:

- **Emotional** - having nightmares, feeling numb, anxious, irritable, anger at the person who died or at something else, scared for their own or the family's safety, feeling like they're going crazy, feeling sad, confused, shocked, lonely, betrayed, jealous, guilty, overwhelmed and sometimes happy or relieved.
- **Spiritual** - wondering “why me/my family?”, anger at God, feeling that there is no point getting close to anyone if we all die, questioning the meaning of life
- **Physical** - feeling exhausted, having headaches or stomachaches, tight jaw, feeling restless, hungry more or less than before, feeling a lump in throat, stomach in knots or a tightness in the chest
- **Mental/Attitudinal** - having trouble concentrating and paying attention, forgetfulness, having trouble sleeping (can't stop thinking/worrying), not knowing how to relate to friends or wanting to be alone, not caring about the future.

While these are all common and natural parts of grief, it is easy to see why it is important to have support through this experience. If a person ever begins to think about hurting themselves or another person, it is very important to get professional help right away.

Taking Care of yourselves

It can be hard to know what to do and how to help when someone is grieving, including yourself. Grieving can be like a cut - it heals itself in its own time, not when we want it to heal. For some people a death and grief make everything feel different and it feels like learning to be a new person in a new world; that can take a long time. Some kinds of grief take weeks or months, some take years and years. All we can do is take care of ourselves and each other and our grief for as long as it's needed. Whether it's yourself or someone you're trying to support, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Sometimes people don't say anything because they are afraid that they will say the wrong thing, or make the person sadder, but most people would rather have their grief acknowledged. Asking "Do you want to talk about how you are feeling today?" gives someone a chance to let their feelings out. One of the most important ways to help someone who is grieving is to just LISTEN.
- Be sensitive to their wishes for privacy. You can let the grieving person know you are there for him or her but also let them know that you're there to listen when they want to talk, not when you want them to.
- Kids who are grieving usually still want to do "regular stuff" too. Playing, staying involved in teams, groups and activities can be really helpful. Being around familiar people, doing things they enjoy doing and keeping a routine all help kids feel that even though so much has changed, some things can stay the same and life can go on.



Checking-in with kids

When they feel so many intense emotions, it can take some time for children and teenagers to sort out their thoughts and feelings. It can be very helpful for them to have a supportive adult to help them talk through these things. Before a special event or activity, talk about what is likely to happen and ask whether there is anything that the child is nervous about or uncomfortable with. If so, ask if there are things that would help them to cope with the experience, such as having a safe place where they can take a break alone or with someone they trust. Afterwards, check in again by asking questions like,

- "How was that for you?"
- "Was there anything that surprised you?"
- "Is there anything that you had questions about?"
- "Was there anything that was hard for you to see or hear?"
- "Was there anything that felt helpful for you?"

Children and teenagers may need more time to think about these things before they're able to find the words to talk about it. If that's the case, let them know you're available to talk about it another time and make sure to check in with them again the next day or a couple of days later.



Web Resources...

For Children & Teens

The Dougy Centre: www.dougy.org

Winston's Wish Foundation: www.winstonswish.org.uk

Sesame Street - Grieving as a family: www.sesamestreet.org/parents/grief

Griefworks BC: www.griefworksbc.com/Kids.asp

Bereaved families of Ontario website for youth by youth www.soul2soul.ca

For Caregivers

Canadian Virtual Hospice: www.virtualhospice.ca

Bereaved families of Ontario <http://www.bfotoronto.ca/>

Literary Resources...

For Children & Teens

Brown, L. K. (1996). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*.

Schweibert, P., & DeKlyen, C. (1999). *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*.

Goldman, L. (2005). *Children Also Grieve: Talking about Death and Healing*.

Abelove, Joan. (1999). *Saying It Out Loud*.

Grollman, Earl A. (1999). *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*

Heegaard, Marge Eaton (1990). *Coping with Death and Grief*.

For Caregivers

Eaton Russell, C. (2007). *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children and Teenagers*.

Silverman, P. R. (1999). *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives*.

Worden, W. (1996). *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*.

The Dougy Centre. (2004). *Helping Teens Cope with Death, and 35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*.

Dr. Jay Children's Grief Centre offers education, counselling support, and medical care in the community and at the Centre to children and families where a child is dying grieving the dying or death of a family member. We also provide consultation and education for healthcare professionals, children's mental health providers and boards of education.

You can find more information on how to support children and youth through grief in *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children*, a book produced by our Centre. The book is for adults who know young people, who will experience, or have experienced, the dying and death of a loved one. To order your copy of *Living Dying* e-mail info@griefcentre.org or call 416-360-1111.

In order to provide this free service to grieving families, we rely entirely on donors like you. To help us continue to support families in need, here are ways you can donate:

- Visit www.drjaychildrensgriefcentre.ca
- Call 416-360-1111
- Use a credit card for a monthly or one-time gift
- Send a cheque to Dr. Jay Children's Grief Centre at 82 Lombard Street, Suite 112, Toronto, ON M5C 2S8