

Strategies for Talking to Children About Grief and Loss

Tips to help you support young people struggling with grief

- **Try to assess what kids understand and what the loss means to them**
 - When loss occurs, kids may not have a clear picture of what will happen next. They may also have witnessed unfamiliar and confusing adult behaviors. Start by asking them gentle, open-ended questions. For example:
 - “You may have noticed that mommy has been sad recently. Do you know why?”
 - “I want to talk to you about death and dying. Can you tell me what you already know?”
 - Make sure they know the loss was not their fault and assure them that they will continue to be cared for.
- **Provide clear, honest information about the situation**
 - Inform kids about a loss or death as soon as you can. Do so in a place where they feel safe and loved. Make sure you have control of your own emotions when you convey the news. Seeing caretakers distressed or inconsolable can be frightening for kids.
 - You may have an urge to protect your kids from pain, but withholding clear information leaves kids to imagine what happened and feel worried or scared.
 - Do NOT use euphemisms. Kids can be very concrete thinkers. Phrases like “passed away” or “gone to sleep” can easily lead kids to thoughts that have nothing to do with death.
 - Explain unfamiliar words and concepts with language that is developmentally appropriate:
 - “Their body doesn’t work anymore, and we won’t get to talk to them ever again.”
 - “Suicide is when someone does something to stop their body from working.”
 - Share your own thoughts and feelings about the loss when you are calm and collected.
- **Don’t judge, do validate, and try to maintain routines**
 - Kids may respond in ways that are flippant, selfish, inappropriately matter-of-fact, etc. Be patient and avoid doing anything to make them feel embarrassed, wrong, or ashamed.
 - Kids may switch between grief and more normal behavior at the drop of hat. They may also not start grieving until long after the loss occurred. Let them move at their own pace.
 - Maintaining familiar routines and activities will help them to heal and move forward.
- **Seek support and provide space for remembrance and memorial**
 - Include family, friends, and professionals in your support system. Let your kids know that it’s fine if they feel more comfortable talking to someone else about their feelings.
 - Some kids want to speak at memorials while others don’t even want to attend them. Avoid pressuring them one way or the other and support what they choose.
 - Encourage them to engage in whatever type of remembrance feels good for them.

The Child Mind Institute is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain, and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need it most. Together with our supporters, we’re helping children reach their full potential in school and in life. Learn more at childmind.org.