

Children and grief

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Grief is a normal response to loss, even in children. When someone a child loves dies, the grieving process is something that should be encouraged, rather than avoided or suppressed.

The opportunity to experience all aspects of normal grief is vital to a child's normal mental development.

Children grieve differently from adults, and each child's grieving process is unique. Children may seem to show grief only once in a while and for short times. This may be because a child is not able to feel strong emotions for long periods of time. A grieving child may be sad one minute and playful the next. Often families think the child doesn't really understand the loss or has gotten over it quickly. Usually, neither is true. Children's minds protect them from what is too much for them to handle emotionally. Children at different stages of development have different understandings of death and the events near death.



How to help children of any age cope with grief

Infant to Age 3

- Have a parent or trusted adult spend time with them every day.
- Keep them as close to the regular adult caregiver as possible.
- Appoint someone to help keep the child's routine.
- If the parent (or parents) need to be absent in order care for the loved one, caregivers can use video, phone, and other means so the child can see and hear the parent (or parents) in real time.
- Record lullabies, stories and messages for them.
- Have regular physical contact like hugs and cuddles.

Age 3 to 5

- Explain what's happening as simply and as often as possible.
- Make sure there is a consistent substitute caregiver when the main one can't be there.
- Regularly assure them that they will always be cared for.
- Do not allow or tolerate aggressive behavior like biting, hitting or kicking.
- Use play and artwork as a means to help them make sense of what's happening.
- Give simple but honest explanations for crying and sadness.

Age 6 to 8

- Explain what they are about to see and experience ahead of any bedside visits.
- Answer all questions honestly, even difficult or uncomfortable ones.
- Assure them that it's perfectly normal and OK to be upset, sad, anxious or angry and that they are still loved.
- Tell them when death is getting close and let them be with the loved one.
- If they're having trouble in school, explain that it's normal for school performance to suffer in this situation and you're not upset with them.
- Assure them that this is not their fault.

Age 9 to 12

- Tell them as much detail as possible about the illness and answer questions honestly.
- Assure them that this is not their fault.
- Let them spend as much time with the loved one as possible.
- Encourage them to keep in contact with their friends and stay involved in after-school activities. Make sure they know that it's OK to have fun.
- Encourage them to express their feelings, but let them know it OK to keep things private, too.
- Encourage any interest they may show in reading or writing about the illness and how it's treated.

Teenagers

- If they're interested, give them details about the loved one's prognosis, symptoms, possible side effects of medication, etc.
- Don't be disappointed if they show little interest in taking on caregiving duties.
- Be sure they know that there's no guilt attached to having fun and spending time with their friends.
- Regularly remind them that everyone has feelings that can sometimes be confusing and overwhelming.
- Let them know that it's perfectly OK to ask you questions and express thoughts that they think might be upsetting.
- Encourage them to keep some kind of journal or log.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.



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