

How to Help Grieving Children

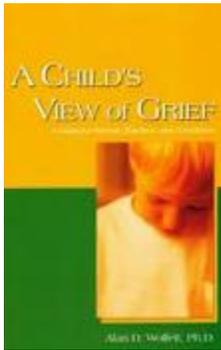
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Adults play an important role in helping children mourn, so it is particularly important for them to learn about the unique aspects of childhood grief. Children grieve in short, intense bursts, over a long period of time and tend to understand the reality of a death in “doses.” They let in just a little of their pain briefly and then return to their play and other distractions so it appears to the world that they are just “fine.” Children want to protect their parents and other family members from further pain, so they frequently hide their strong feelings. They are called our “forgotten mourners” as often children get lost and ignored in the whole grief process. Caring adults must become their advocates and act as “grief detectives.”

Grief is the collection of internal thoughts and feelings that occur when we experience loss. It is the natural, spontaneous reaction to loss and relates to the anguish bereaved persons feel. Grief affects a person emotionally, spiritually, physically, mentally, and in every other aspect of life. **Mourning** is the outward and shared expression of that grief. Dr. Alan Wolfelt defines mourning as “grief gone public” or “sharing your grief outside of yourself.” It is the cultural expression of grief, as seen in traditional or creative rituals. Close friends and relatives can assist parents in helping their children mourn and find new ways to honour and remember their loved one. Consider the following **C’s** as suggestions that parents and others can use to help grieving children navigate through their unique grief journey.





Concise language... Until children are about 5 or 6 years old, their view of the world is very literal, so explain the death in basic and concrete terms. If the deceased was ill or elderly, you might explain that the person's body wasn't working anymore and the doctors couldn't fix it. If someone dies suddenly, like in an accident, you might explain what happened — that because of this very sad event, the person's body stopped working. Explain that "dying" or "dead" means that the body stopped working. Avoid using euphemisms, such as telling them that the loved one "went away" or "went to sleep" or even that your family "lost" the person. Since children think literally, such phrases might inadvertently make them feel afraid to go to sleep, become fearful whenever someone goes away or think about searching for the lost person. Using phrases such as "gone away" or "passed away" may be confusing for children, especially younger ones who may think that the deceased is only gone for a while and will be returning.

Communication... Since only 7% of our communication is verbal, what is the language of their grief? Words? Tears? Anger? Acting out? Distraction? Attention seeking? Regression? Physical symptoms? Music? Art? Writing? Remember that each child's grief is unique and doesn't follow a set pattern or time-line. Do not presume to know how they are feeling but closely watch their behaviour for clues and try to understand their play. Expect mood swings, anger, resentment, and regression.



Comfort... What can you do to comfort a grieving child? One suggestion is to make up a "comfort bag" filled with all sorts of things that bring comfort to them. Be creative, as the contents should be tailored to each child. Here are some ideas: a teddy bear or cuddly stuffed animal; a pillow made from an article of clothing from their loved one and sprayed with their favourite perfume or after-shave; a small package of Kleenex to wipe away their tears; a journal to record their thoughts and to draw pictures of their loved one; blank paper, markers, scissors, glue and stickers; a bottle of bubbles; balloons; a CD of their loved one's favourite music; or a picture featuring their loved one at a family event. They can add their own comfort objects to this bag as well. Create a list together

of support people and things they can do when they feel sad and add it to their bag. They can add other items to it as time goes on. Make sure that the bag itself is colourful and cheerful.

Consult... Consult with your children to determine their wishes and include them in planning commemorative events such as the visitation and funeral. Make sure that they know what to expect and ask them to make suggestions about what they would like to include. Most funeral homes can accommodate for the special wishes of children by helping to set up balloons, teddy bears, art boards and displaying personal pictures and letters to loved ones.



Conversations and connections ... Talk with them about their loved one, mention his/her name frequently and describe good memories in detail. Children love to hear these stories over and over again. Let them share their feelings and tell their own stories. Keep the communication lines open by spending one-on-one time with them and encouraging them to participate in their favourite activities.

Continuing Bonds... Help children maintain a connection with their deceased loved one. Continuing bonds can be maintained by talking about their loved one and sharing memories; by symbolic communication such as attaching a message to a balloon and releasing the balloon or writing a letter to the deceased; and by memorial activities, such as visiting the grave, attending memorial services, and taking part in creative ceremonies and rituals.

Contact ... Appropriate hugs, kisses, and cuddles are an ideal way to stay connected. Kids need close physical contact from their family members now more than ever. If you are a family friend, ask them how they would like to be greeted (e.g. by hugs, shaking hands, or giving a high five). Respect their right not to be touched, also.



Clown around ... Children need to take breaks in their grieving. They tend to grieve in doses and cannot be sad continuously. Encourage them to laugh and give them permission to have some fun: blow bubbles, go tobogganing, make a snowman, stage a play, jump on a trampoline or run in the park.

Create ... Let them draw, colour, paint or construct their stories and express their feelings through their artwork. They might wish to create a picture or a collage in memory of their loved one. Playing music, singing, writing poetry, or journaling should be encouraged.



Carry ... Allow them to carry around pictures of their loved one and to have a loved one's shirt or other article of clothing to sleep in. You can even spray the item with perfume or aftershave that smells like their loved one. One mom made Teddy Bears out of grandpa's old flannel shirts for the grandchildren to cuddle with.

Change ... Allow children to help make decisions about their routines and future plans. Children may feel they have more control of the situation when they are involved in decision-making. Change is okay.

Commemorate... Activities to commemorate their memories can be as simple as burning a candle or visiting the gravesite and leaving personal cards and letters.



Candles... For centuries people around the world have burned candles in remembrance of loved ones who have died. Lighting a candle is viewed as a sacred ritual in many different traditions and religions. To light a virtual candle, go to the following website: www.gratefulness.org/candles/enter.cfm?l=eng

Centre ... Remember the family is the centre of your children's world. They need stability, and it is your responsibility to maintain it. If your situation seems overwhelming then allow caring friends to help you out. Seek out support from your community as well.

Culture... The grieving child's responses are influenced by her cultural and ethnic backgrounds, so plan activities that celebrate the family's traditions and beliefs.

Computers... can supply a wealth of information about how to help grieving children and teens. Myspace, Facebook and other computer programs provide unique ways to mourn and commemorate. google The Grief of Children...



A website for grieving teens by BFO Toronto	www.soul2soul.ca
Compassionate Support	www.kara-grief.org
Create a Memorial Website	www.memory-of.com/Public/
Linda Goldman	www.childrengrief.net
Liana Lowenstein: Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children and Adolescents	www.lianalowenstein.com
Bereaved Families of Toronto	www.bfotoronto.ca
Bill Webster	www.GriefJourney.com
Dougy Centre	www.dougy.org
Sibling Grief	www.siblingconnection.net
Virtual Hospice	www.virtualhospice.ca
Winston's Wish	www.winstonswish.org.uk

Control ... Remember your child's world may be in chaos. You can control their sense of safety, security and structure by setting specific times for wake-up, bed, meal, school, homework and television watching.

Composure ... Don't feel like you always have to be composed, as it is okay for your children to see your tears and pain. Model how it is possible to blend mourning and coping with life. You can remember the person who died and mourn his absence while still finding happiness in everyday life events.

Care ... Grief affects the total person and requires care for the body, mind, and soul. It is especially important to focus on healthy eating, exercise, and sleeping patterns.



Closeness... Stay close to your children through daily talks or activities. A good place to get a child to talk is in the car.

Cook ... Let them bake a special meal or dessert in memory of their loved one. Invite family and friends to join in.

Celebrate ... Let them go to holiday parties and family get-togethers. Make new memories and new traditions. Attend a candlelight memorial service and let them honour the memory of their loved one.



Compassion ... Let them help those who are less fortunate. Purchase a gift for a needy child, deliver meals to a less fortunate family, or assist at a shelter feeding the homeless.

Church... Attend religious services with them if this is part of your tradition. It is important to pay attention to their spiritual beliefs.

Consider that grief bursts or “memory embraces” are normal even long after the loss and can be triggered by sights, sounds, smells or the written word.

Closure ... There really is no such thing as “closure.” Their loved one will continue to be a part of their lives through their continued bonds of love and memory. They will never get over their loss and forget their loved one, but they will develop a “new normal” as their grief progresses and their pain subsides. (Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.) Expect grief to resurface at birthdays, Christmas, Mother’s Day and Father’s Day and at developmental milestones such as Grade 8 Graduation, first prom, driving test, etc.

Capacity ... It is helpful to know that children are amazingly resilient and have the capacity to heal. There are some reliable signs of recovery: their memories cause smiles not tears; a sense of humour returns; regular sleeping and eating patterns resume; tears and anger are less frequent; and the child does things he used to do in an age appropriate manner.

Check out warning signs that indicate your child might need professional help:



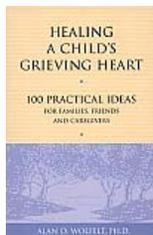
www.hospicenet.org/html/children.html

Connect with support people and programs within your community. i.e. your doctor, school, church, Bereaved Families of Ontario, Hearth Place Cancer Support Centre, Rainbows.



Contact your child's school and make sure you let them know what is going on. The teachers, school administration and support personnel can be valuable sources of ongoing support. It is common for children to have difficulty concentrating on their studies and completing assignments and marks often suffer after a loss. Accommodations can be made to help your child during this tough period .

Choose special books for your children and resources for caring adults on the topic of Childhood Grief such as : The Next Place by Warren Hanson and Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids, 100 Practical Ideas by Alan Wolfelt Ph. D. Healing a Child's Grieving Heart; Practical Ideas for families, friends & caregivers by Alan Wolfelt Ph. D. When Families Grieve: A Sesame Street Project includes video clips from their DVD When Families Grieve, a children's storybook and caregiver guide. Download for free: <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/grief>



“The greatest gift you can give your children is not protection from change, loss, pain or stress, but the confidence and tools to cope and grow with all that life has to offer them.”

Dr. Wendy Harpham

The Grief of Children

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Take time to learn about the unique aspects of childhood grief. Children grieve in short, intense bursts, over a long period of time and tend to understand the reality of a death in “doses.” They let in just a little of their pain briefly and then return to their play and other distractions so it appears to the world that they are just “fine.”

Honesty is critical when giving information to children in age-appropriate language.

Expect changes in behavior, mood swings, anger, resentment, and regression. Do not presume to know how they are feeling but closely watch their behaviour for clues and try to understand their play.

Grief is progressing when memories cause smiles not tears; a sense of humour returns; regular sleeping and eating patterns resume; tears and anger are less frequent; and the child does things he used to do in an age appropriate manner.

Research warning signs that indicate a child needs professional help.

(www.hospicenet.org/html/children.html)

Initiate contacts with support people and programs within your community i.e. your doctor, school, church, Bereaved Families of Ontario, Hearth Place Cancer Support Centre, Rainbows.

Encourage participation in fun activities and set up opportunities for play with friends.

Focus on creating child-friendly mourning rituals and commemorative activities. Funeral homes can accommodate the special wishes of children by helping to set up balloons, teddy bears, art boards and displaying personal pictures and letters to loved ones. If they are old enough to love, they are old enough to mourn.

On-line grief and loss websites can supply a wealth of information about how to help grieving children and teens. Go to www.dougy.org and www.soul2soul.ca ; Google The Grief of Children...

Fantasy reasoning and magical thinking frequently take place when children believe that their wishes, thoughts or actions caused the death or can bring the person back. They need to know that bad thoughts and words will not kill people.

Creative outlets such as singing, listening to music, painting, drawing, dance, journaling, writing poems, or playing dress-up can help children express their grief. Children tend to mourn through their play.

Hold and nurture your child, giving lots of physical attention.

Identify special books for your children and resources for caring adults on the topic of Childhood Grief such as [The Next Place](#) by Warren Hanson, [Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids, 100 Practical Ideas](#) by Alan Wolfelt Ph. D. and [Healing a Child's Grieving Heart; Practical Ideas for families, friends & caregivers](#) by Alan Wolfelt Ph. D. [When Families Grieve: A Sesame Street Project](#) includes video clips from their DVD, a children's storybook and caregiver guide. Download for free: <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/grief>

Let your child's school know what is going on. Teachers, school administration and support personnel can be valuable sources of ongoing support. It is common for grieving children to have difficulty concentrating on their studies and completing assignments and their marks often suffer. Accommodations can be made by the school to help your child during this tough period.

Decide to use concise language. Until children are about 5 or 6 years old, their view of the world is very literal, so explain the death in basic and concrete terms. Explain that "dying" or "dead" means that the body stopped working. Since children think literally avoid using euphemisms, such as telling them that the loved one “passed away,” “went away” or “went to sleep” or even that your family “lost” the person.

Redirect aggressive behavior into effective avenues of expression and make time for physical outlets, sports, games, nature walks etc.

Expect grief to resurface at birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, Mother's Day and Father's Day and at developmental milestones such as Grade 8 Graduation, first prom, driving test, etc. Grief bursts or “memory embraces” are normal long after the loss and can be triggered by sights, sounds, smells or the written word.

Never discount or judge their emotional reactions. Remember that each child's grief is unique and doesn't follow a set pattern or time-line. “It takes as long as it takes.”

Teenage Grief Relief



Teach teens about common grief symptoms to reassure them that they are not going crazy, they are grieving.

Expect mood swings, anger, resentment, and regression.

Each teen's grief journey is unique.

Never discount or judge their emotional reactions.

Allow as much time as they need for their grief process. It takes as long as it takes.

Generate a support system for them.

Educate others about the unique nature of their grief and what helps

(http://www.hov.org/teen_grief_program.aspx).

Grief bursts or "memory embraces" can be triggered anytime by sights, sounds, smells or the written word.

Research warning signs that indicate a teen needs professional help.

Investigate online grief support such as www.soul2soul.ca and www.dougy.inspire.com.

Encourage bereavement groups because peer support is invaluable.

Focus on creating mourning rituals and commemorative activities.

Recognize how they communicate their grief as only 7% of their communication is verbal. Words? Tears? Anger? Acting out? Distraction? Music? Art work? Attention seeking? Regression? Physical symptoms?

Enlist school personnel to advocate for flexibility in academic expectations as grieving teens have trouble concentrating and meeting deadlines.

Listen to grieving teens and learn from them. Please don't assume you know how they are feeling.

Invite them to tell their story many times and to talk about their loved one.

Expect grief to resurface at anniversaries, birthdays, Father's Day, Mother's Day, Christmas and at developmental milestones such as first prom, high school graduation etc.

Friends can be helpful to grieving teens. Suggest reading: [Healing a Teen's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas For Families, Friends and Caregivers](#) by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph. D., Companion Press, 2001.

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YouTube videos about **The Grief of Children and Teens:**

- **Under the Surface:** Uploaded by CMHA Windsor on Sep 24, 2010. First-hand accounts from local youth who have experienced the loss of a loved one. www.cmha-wecb.on.ca/bereavement/teens/interact.asp 33:42
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- **Teens Talk Grief:** Uploaded by Hospice Calgary on Nov 8, 2011 . Grieving teens share their stories and talk about what helped as they journeyed through the grief of losing someone close to them. Go to www.hospicecalgary.com for further information. 7:04
- **Teen Grief: Coping and Getting Help:** Uploaded by Hospice of Valley, Arizona on July 19, 2011. This video is produced by teens for teens. It explains what grief is ... how it affects teens physically, emotionally, mentally, socially and spiritually ... and how to get help. A number of teens share their real-life experiences dealing with grief. To order go to www.hov.org/teen_grief_program.aspx. 7:51
- **Teen Grief:** Uploaded by opentohope 3 years ago. Dr. Gloria Horsley Ph.D., author of Teen Grief Relief, lost her son Scott in a car accident and she talks to parents on how to help their teens cope after a loss. Google: Open to Hope Foundation for further information. 4:20
- **Linda Goldman MS and Dr Heidi Horsley; Children and Grief:** Uploaded by opentohope on Dec 1, 2011. 6:32
- **Children's Grieving** Uploaded by CBS on April 11, 2010. Katie Couric gives a helping hand to kids and parents coping with loss. 9:40



When Families Grieve A Sesame Street Project includes video clips from their DVD *When Families Grieve*, a children's storybook and caregiver guide. Download for free: <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/grief> .

Articles on Children and Funerals



<http://www.tubmanfuneralhomes.com/en/learning-resources/faq-submit-question/children-and-funerals>

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/raising-grieving-children/201011/taking-children-the-funeral>