



Helping Your Child Cope with the Death of a Loved One

How to Talk With Your Children
After a Loved One Dies



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Where to Begin?

Losing a parent, sibling, grandparent, relative or friend is one of the hardest things a person can experience. At a time when your own emotions are heightened and your energy feels depleted, as a parent or guardian, it can seem overwhelming to find the words to comfort your child and help them cope with the loss they are also experiencing.

You may be wondering how to talk to your child about death. What do they already know? What do they truly understand? How can you help them?

This booklet was created to help provide guidance to caregivers to help facilitate and support conversations about death with children. Children do not interpret death the same way as adults. Children of different ages each have their own understanding of death.

This booklet will help to provide insight into how each age group understands death, common reactions to death and age-appropriate ways that you can help your child cope with the death of a loved one. It is important to know that all your questions may not be answered in this booklet, and each child is individual in how they cope with trauma and loss. Our hope is that this will provide a foundation of understanding that you can build on with your child. If you feel that you need further assistance or information, you may want to seek out support from other resources such as a Child Life specialist, a teacher, a minister or a licensed counselor.

Keep these general guidelines in mind when talking about the death of a loved one with your child.

Nurturing Positive Coping

Show your understanding and caring by saying:

"This is a very sad time for all of us. You may see me angry or upset or even crying, but I am not angry with you! I love you very much. It is normal to feel angry and sad. It is ok if you feel this way too. It is ok to cry when we are sad."

"A lot of people may want to talk to you and try to make you feel better by saying nice things. Or they may want to tell you how you should feel. I feel it is important that we share these things with each other so we can help each other while we are sad or mad or upset."

"I want you to feel free to talk to me anytime about how you are feeling. It is ok for us to share our sad moments and our happy moments. It's even ok to talk about the person who has died. Sometimes it might make us sad or cry or sometimes it can make us feel happy to remember them."

Get down to the child's eye level when you are talking.

Hold and comfort them when appropriate. Speak directly to them and avoid vague phrases such as "You need to be brave now." Or "Be a big girl/boy and stop crying."

Avoid terms that may be confusing such as "passed on," "lost," or "taken from us." These phrases may give mixed messages and may not communicate that death is permanent. Children think in simple and clear terms so, though it may be difficult, using terms like "death," "dead," and "dying" is important for a child's understanding and coping.

Give an explanation for the cause of death.

What caused the body to stop working?

It is important to give a developmentally appropriate explanation for why the body has stopped working so that the child is not left to come up with their own reasons because their imagination may be far worse than the reality. For example, "Sam was in a car accident and the doctors were not able to make his boo boos better." Reassure the child that once someone dies, they no longer feel any pain in their body.

Listen and be prepared for questions such as:

- "Where does the body go?"
- "Is there life after death?"
- "What will we do without our loved one? Where will we live? How will we get things we need? (Food, school supplies, clothes, etc.)"

It's ok if you don't have all the answers. It's ok to say, "I don't know that answer right now, but we will work it out." It is important to reassure the child that they are loved and will be taken care of.

Help the child say goodbye to their loved one.

Prior to the death of a loved one, different legacy building activities can be done to create memories with the person they love. After a loved one dies, you can help the child say goodbye by encouraging their participation in the funeral, writing a letter, drawing a picture to their loved one or sharing a special item the child can keep to remember their loved one.

Involve the child in funeral arrangements if possible.

This shows them that their input matters. Be sure to provide the child with the choice to attend or not. If the child does attend, assign a point person to the child so they can take breaks or leave if they start to feel overwhelmed.

This may look like the child picking out the flowers, picking out pictures they like of their loved one to be displayed, picking out an item to place in the coffin with their loved one, or picking out a scripture or quote to be read at the service.

Provide opportunities for the child to express themselves through play.

Play is a child's way of working through feelings and emotions. It is normal and expected that a child may include what they experienced during the loved one's death in their pretend play. And this type of play can reoccur for quite some time. Be observant during the child's play. You may observe misconceptions the child has about the death of their loved one.

For example, the child may be playing with a doll, and you may hear them say, "You are sick and going to die. And then mommy and me will get sick and die too." This would be a good opportunity to re-explain the circumstances surrounding the death of their loved one and clear up this misconception.

If you feel like you have questions regarding your child's methods of play, please seek out professional counseling or play therapy.

Children's Understanding of Death

Children of all ages understand death differently. It is important to explain death in age-appropriate language, so your child understands at their level. Some grief reactions are the same across age groups. Examples are guilt, anger, fear, anxiety and sadness.

However, some age groups may exhibit reactions that are specific to their development. Sometimes a child's understanding or reaction to death can depend on if a loved one was sick for a long time or if the death was sudden and unexpected.

The following section will help explain a child's understanding of death, their reactions and how you can help based on their specific age.



How Children Cope by Age



Infants/Toddlers 0-2 years

Children's Understanding

This age has no understanding of death but reacts to:

- **Fear of separation** – mostly unsettled by the loss of physical presence of a parent
- **Parent's emotions** – infants are very sensitive to the emotions and body language of their parents

Possible Behaviors

- Crankiness
- Crying
- Clinging
- Changes in sleep schedule
- Developmental regression/pause
- Less active or responsive

What Can You Do To Help?

- Keep routines as regular as possible.
- Allow family and friends to help with routine tasks and care when needed.
- Hold and comfort child as much as possible.
- Provide comfort items.
- Provide opportunities for play.
- Be a calming presence/ speak gently to them.

Preschool

2.5-5 years

Children's Understanding

Death is not seen as permanent, but reversible or temporary.

- Death may be confused with sleep or thinking the person will return. *(Remember to avoid phrasing such as "long nap" or "sleeping" and use the words "death" and "dead")*
- Death may be seen as a punishment for a wrongdoing
- Child considers self as center of the universe (*egocentric mindset - may think the death was caused by them*)
- Child may think he can catch the same sickness that led to death
- Child may think dead people live underground

Possible Behaviors

- May show little interest or concern at times
 - May have regressive behaviors
 - Bed wetting
 - Thumb sucking
 - Baby talk
 - Fear of the dark
 - May show fear of separation from caregivers at bedtime or at school drop off
 - May need to talk about the death a lot (*and often at times that are perceived as inappropriate*).
- This repetition helps the child process the permanence of death.
- The child may say things like "We are going to the park today, but not Sam because he's dead." Or "Mommy doesn't need her blanket because she's dead."
 - Asking the same questions repeatedly. Again, repetition is important.
 - The child may look for the person who has died

What Can You Do To Help?

- Keep routines as regular as possible.
- Reassure them that the death was not their fault.
- Be patient when they ask the same questions.
- Provide opportunities for choice and control when possible.
- Allow them space to play through their emotions.
- Tell them what to expect after the death:
 - House filled with people
 - They may see people crying and upset a lot
 - Will their living arrangements change?
- Keep explanations simple and concrete.
 - "Sam was very sick, and his heart stopped beating. When his heart stopped beating, his body stopped working. This is called dying."
 - "Sam died so he can no longer talk, play or eat. We won't see Sam anymore. But being dead does not hurt."



School Age

5-11 years

Children's Understanding

Death is seen as possible, and the child starts to understand that death is permanent and that the body does not function anymore when it dies. Details about the cause of death might become important as the child works through their understanding of what happened.

Possible Behaviors

- Unable to focus/difficulty in school/poor grades
- Crying
- Anxiety
- Physical manifestations of grief
 - Stomachache
 - Headache
 - Nightmares/Lack of sleep
- Separation anxiety
- Denial of death
- Anger towards deceased/feelings of abandonment
- Withdrawn
- Lack of attention or loss of skills
- Reenacting death or trauma through play
- Have desire to take on adult responsibilities
- Rapid changes in emotion/mood
- Worrying about safety of self and others
- Children may not seem to care about the death of their loved one at first

What Can You Do To Help?

- Review suggestions for preschool age as they can also relate to school agers
- Explain that everyone reacts to death differently. They may feel sad now or sad two weeks from now. They may feel angry this week and sad next week.
- Give permission to cry. It's ok to show emotion.
- Give appropriate outlets if child is displaying anger.
 - Scream into a pillow
 - Paint with colors that represent anger
 - Write a letter to the deceased. It's ok if it's an angry letter right now.
 - Seek additional help if anger becomes a dominant behavior. Child may benefit from meeting with a licensed counselor.
- Encourage participation in funeral plans and attendance to funeral. Abide by child's wishes and understand reasonings if child decides not to go.
- Be a good listener.
- Be patient with your child as they process their grief.
- Let them know their feelings are very important.



Adolescent 12-18 years

Children's Understanding

Child begins to think more like adults. They are able to think more abstractly and now begin to understand the full implications of death. Child may see suicide as a way of getting back at someone, but also see it as reversible because some survive it and repeatable because some try it more than once.

Possible Behaviors

- Want to assume a more adult role
 - Take on caregiving role for others even if a caregiver is still present
- Anger
- Preoccupation with death:
 - Taking on mannerisms of deceased
 - Aggression
- Practice denial of death by risk taking/risky behaviors
- May be very critical of parent's handling of financial arrangements, funeral arrangements, etc.
- Social withdrawal
- Irritability
- Unable to concentrate or strive for perfection
- Sleep disruptions
- Eating excessively or not eating
- Emotional highs and lows
- May not want to talk about death with those they trust
- Safety concerns for self and others
- Masking of feelings/acting like they don't care
- Blaming themselves for death
- Feelings of guilt if a relationship was strained

What Can You Do To Help?

- Review suggestions for school age as some may still apply to the adolescent.
- Encourage communication with trusted family, friend or counselor.
- Discuss role changes that may occur in family.
- Encourage emotional expression and be willing to listen and validate feelings.
- Give honest answers.
- Avoid expectations of adult behaviors/roles - allow them to be teens.
- Aid in finding a support group if necessary.
- Talk with them about grief and death.
- Be patient.
- Allow them privacy if they want it.
- Seek professional help if you become concerned about your teen's behavior or if you are concerned about them having thoughts about harming themselves or others.

What Should I Say?

Use words like “dead” or “died.”

Be realistic when talking to your child about what happened. Using euphemisms like “passed away” or “in a better place” can cause misconceptions and confusion.

Acknowledge their grief and allow them to express their emotions and ask questions.

Validate their feelings and provide opportunities for play.

Help your child remember the person.

Encourage your child to recall happy memories. Do not avoid talking about the person who died. Create a photo book with favorite photos of their loved one.

Deliver information in small doses.

Meet the child where they are. Only give as much information as they can handle one more time.

Tell your child what to expect.

Let the child know if there will be any changes to their day-to-day life. Talk to them about funerals or rituals and allow them to take part.



Remember

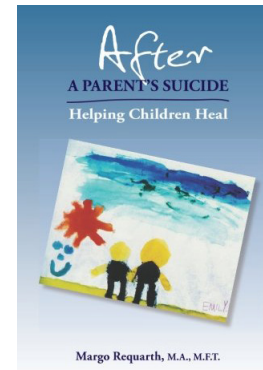


Coping with death is difficult for everybody. Remembering that children understand death differently can be difficult at times. Reach out to your support system when needed to help. Your support system can include family members, close friends, religious community, counselors, etc.

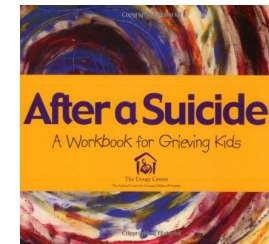
Remember to:

- Create opportunities for play, relaxation and privacy.
- Respond to your child's reactions in a supportive way.
- Provide outlets for them to express emotions.
- Keep routines as regular as possible.
- Grief can resurface long after death occurs. Continue to support your child to meet their needs.

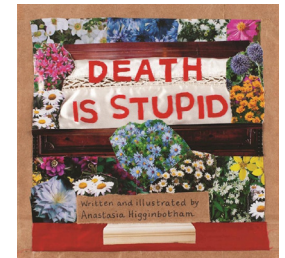
Recommended Children's Books About Grief



After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal
Margo Requarth



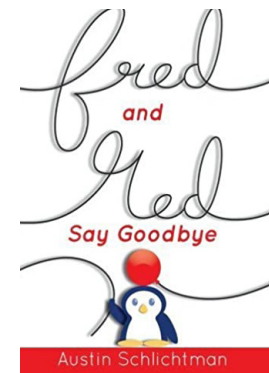
After a Suicide: An Activity Book for Grieving Children
The Dougy Center



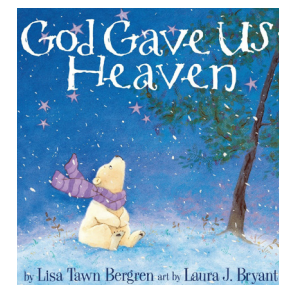
Death is Stupid
Anastasia Higginbotham



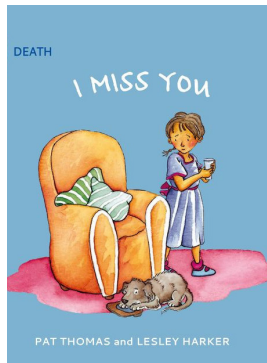
Forever Connected: As Guide for Parents, Activities to Help Build & Maintain Connections with A Dying Parent
Caitlin Koch



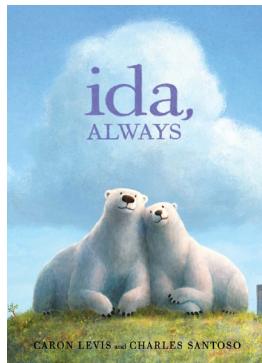
Fred and Red Say Goodbye
Austin Schlichtman



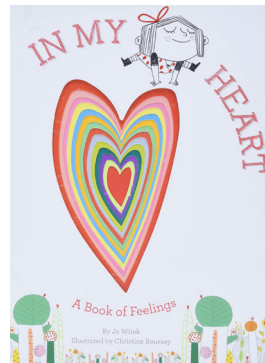
God Gave Us Heaven
Lisa T. Bergren



I Miss You: A First Look at Death
Pat Thomas



Ida, Always
Caron Lewis



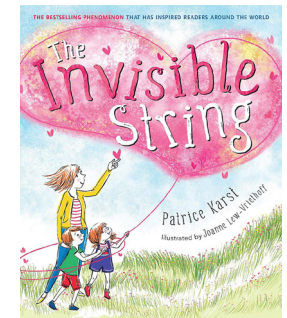
In My Heart: A Book of Feelings
Jo Witek



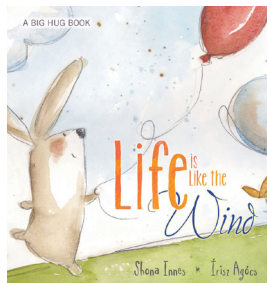
Sun Kisses, Moon Hugs
Susan Scafer Bernado and Courtenay Fletcher
(English and Spanish)



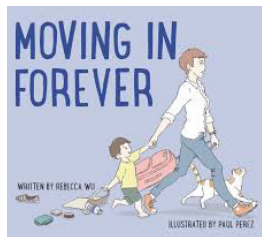
The Heart and the Bottle
Oliver Jeffers



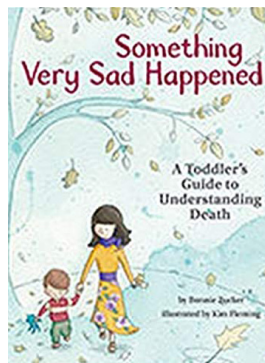
The Invisible String
Patrice Karst



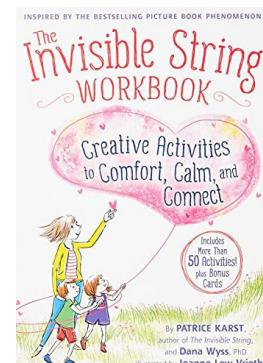
Life is Like the Wind
Shona Innes



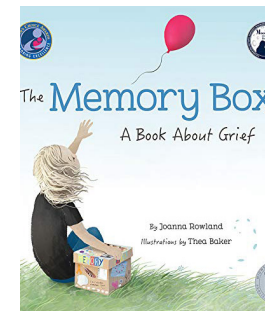
Moving In Forever
Rebecca Wu



Something Very Sad Happened
Bonnie Zucker



The Invisible String Workbook
Patrice Karst and Dana Wyss



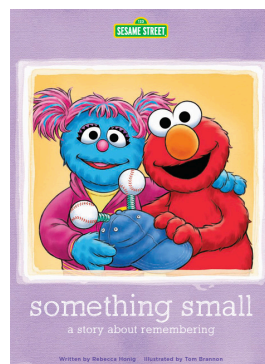
A Memory Box: A Book About Grief
Joanna Rowland



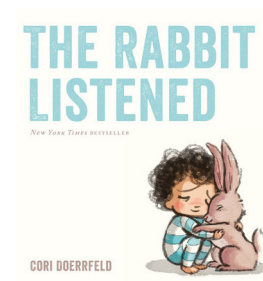
The Next Place
by Warren Hanson



Someone Came Before You
Pat Schwieber



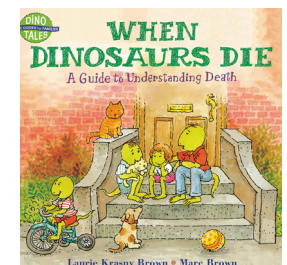
Something Small
Rebecca Honig



The Rabbit Listened
Cori Doerrfeld



We Were Gonna Have a Baby, But We Had an Angel Instead
Pat Schwiebert



When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death
BLaurie Krasny Brown

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