

Toolkit for Parents and Guardians

Helping Children Process Grief and Loss

Grief is a natural response to loss—but for children, it can be especially confusing and overwhelming. Whether they've lost a pet, a loved one, a caregiver, or are adjusting to a major life change like divorce or moving, children need safe, compassionate support to help them make sense of their feelings.

This toolkit is designed to provide guidance, strategies, and gentle tools for parents and guardians who want to support a grieving child with care and confidence.

1. Understand How Children Grieve

Grief looks different at every age. Children may not express sadness the way adults do—instead, it might come out as anger, clinginess, acting out, or even laughter.

Age-Specific Reactions:

- Preschoolers (2–5): Confused by permanence of death, may ask repetitive questions, show regression (e.g., bedwetting).
- School-age (6–12): May fear their own safety or feel responsible. Can show sadness, anger, withdrawal, or perfectionism.
- Teens (13+): Grieve more like adults but often hide emotions. Might experience guilt, numbness, or risk-taking behavior.

Children may grieve in waves—they often oscillate between sadness and play. This is normal and healthy.

2. Start with Safety and Honesty

- Use clear, simple language. Say “death” or “died” rather than “passed away” or “went to sleep,” which can be confusing.
- Be honest. You don’t have to have all the answers—just be real.
- Let them ask questions and give space for silence.

Try this:

“I want you to know it’s okay to feel however you feel. I’m here with you, and I’ll keep being here.”

3. Validate Their Emotions

Kids need to know their feelings make sense.

- Avoid rushing them to “move on” or “be strong.”
- Normalize emotions: “It makes sense that you feel angry/sad/confused.”
- Watch for signs of self-blame and gently reassure, “This isn’t your fault.”

4. Create Routines and Rituals

Grief can make the world feel unpredictable. Routines help restore a sense of safety.

- Keep familiar mealtimes, bedtimes, and schedules as much as possible.
- Create a ritual of remembrance:
 - Light a candle
 - Create a memory box
 - Draw pictures or write letters to the person or pet who died

5. Use Books and Creative Expression

Children often express their emotions, thoughts, and feelings through play, art, and storytelling.

Books that might help (by age group):

- The Invisible String by Patrice Karst (ages 4–8)
- When Dinosaurs Die by Laurie Krasny Brown (ages 5–10)
- Sad Isn't Bad by Michaelene Mundy (ages 5–12)
- Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers by Earl A. Grollman (teens)

Encourage drawing, journaling, music, or pretend play to help them process.

6. When to Seek Additional Support

Grief takes time, but some signs may suggest a child could benefit from additional help:

- Persistent withdrawal or numbness
- Intense anger or aggression
- Ongoing nightmares or sleep disturbance
- Talking about wanting to die or self-harm
- Decline in school performance or interest in activities

A therapist trained in grief and child development can help.

7. Take Care of Yourself, Too

Children often mirror the emotional states of their caregivers. Supporting your own grief helps them feel secure.

- Be honest about your feelings in age-appropriate ways.
- Take breaks, ask for help, and find someone you can talk to.

Helpful Phrases to Use with Grieving Children

- “It’s okay to cry. Crying is one way we heal.”
- “I miss them too.”
- “There’s no right or wrong way to feel.”
- “We’re going to get through this together.”
- “You can talk to me any time.”