

When Children Grieve



Your Life Helper

a compassionate space to grow

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Objectives



- How to Inform Children of a Death
- 10 Myths of Children Grieving
- Identity Grief in Children
- What Mistakes Adults Make with Children



INFORMING A CHILD OF A SIGNIFICANT DEATH



Basic Principles of Informing a Child of a Death

- ★ **Keep it simple.** Use “died,” not “He is sleeping.”
 - (I.e.: “Colin, there was an accident at work today. Daddy was working on the 5th floor when a guardrail broke and he fell down to the ground. The fall was so far and so hard that he died.”)
- ★ **Allow your child to express raw feelings freely or ask questions.**
- ★ **Answer questions honestly and simply. Do not go into detail, unless asked.**
- ★ **If the death was due to a violent crime, explain how the child will remain safe.**

INFORMING A CHILD OF A SIGNIFICANT DEATH



Basic Principles of Informing a Child of a Death

- ★ **If the body is suitable for viewing, allow the child to see your deceased loved one, if requested. Prepare the child for what he or she will see.**
- ★ **Tell your child what will be happening in the next few days.**
- ★ **Give your child choices in what to do. Some children want to go to school the day of the death. Familiar routines are comforting. Inform the school of the death before your child returns.**
- ★ **Reassure your child that he or she will be cared for and explain the plan.**

~Goldman, L. (2013). *Life and loss: A guide to help grieving children*.
Routledge.

Let's Talk About Grief...Explaining Death to Children



[MyGriefAssist](#)

In this short video Doris Zagdanski helps adults to talk with grieving children.

Myths of Children's Grief



Created by Gan Khoon Lay
from the Noun Project

Segal, R. M. (1984). Helping children express grief through symbolic communication. *Social casework*, 65(10), 590-599.

★ **Grief and mourning are the same experience.**

Grief has been described as the inward process following death while mourning takes on characteristics of outward expressions of grief or the sharing of one's story.

★ **Adults instantly can give explanations to children about death and spirituality.**

Adults often deny that children can experience the painful feelings of death and are also dealing with the rawness of the experience. Therefore, many adults cannot bring themselves to address the needs of children around them and often benefit from professional support at this time.

★ **The experience of grief and mourning has orderly stages.**

Our reactions to grief are not linear in nature. We can be overwhelmed by any one or combination of grief reactions that often leave the child feeling as though they have lost control of life.

Myths of Children's Grief



Segal, R. M. (1984). Helping children express grief through symbolic communication. *Social casework*, 65(10), 590-599.

★ **The grief of adults does not impact the bereaved child.**

Children are keenly aware of the grieving adults around them and need accurate information about the death. Including the children in the activities and experiences following the death of a loved one diminishes anxiety and fear that otherwise may grow into negative behaviors if left unaddressed. Children care for the adults in their lives and long to soothe those around them. After the death of a loved one, a child from infancy through adolescence needs reassurance that together the family will survive this difficult time.

★ **Adults should avoid topics that cause a child to cry.**

Tears are essential to healing for all ages. While exhausting to cry it helps the healing process. Children also teach us that they are sad because their loved one died and therefore no one can say anything that will make them sadder.

Myths of Children's Grief



Segal, R. M. (1984). Helping children express grief through symbolic communication. *Social casework*, 65(10), 590-599.

★ An active playing child is not a grieving child.

This is one of the essential differences in how children grieve. Once told that their loved one has died, a child will often protect themselves from the pain by engaging in a familiar activity, this is a healthy self-soothing process. They should not be shamed for taking care of themselves. A young child may ask to watch cartoons or a teen may go outdoors immediately and shoot hoops or ride their bikes. This behavior only indicates that they are taking a brief break and will return to their grief again, many times.

★ Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.

It has been stated "if you are old enough to love you are old enough to mourn." Anyone bonded to another will recognize that that person is no longer with them and feel the pain of the loved ones absence.

Myths of Children's Grief



Segal, R. M. (1984). Helping children express grief through symbolic communication. *Social casework*, 65(10), 590-599.

- ★ **Parents, educators, and clergy are always prepared and qualified to give explanations and clarifications regarding loss and grief.**

Anyone involved in the grief experience is at a loss for a total explanation of what has just happened. Often at the time of death we all experience more questions than there are answers, often parents, educators and clergy are only able to share their abilities to listen and not provide detailed information.

- ★ **Children need to "get over" their grief and move on.**

The death of a loved one must be understood in the context of never getting over or moving on from this loss. The pain of the present will become more manageable at some point in time, but we will always experience parts of this pain for the rest of our lives. Telling this to a grieving child will comfort them rather than scare them. They will trust you and thank you for your honesty. A gentle reminder that we do not want to forget our loved ones but instead want to honor their presence in our lives forever.

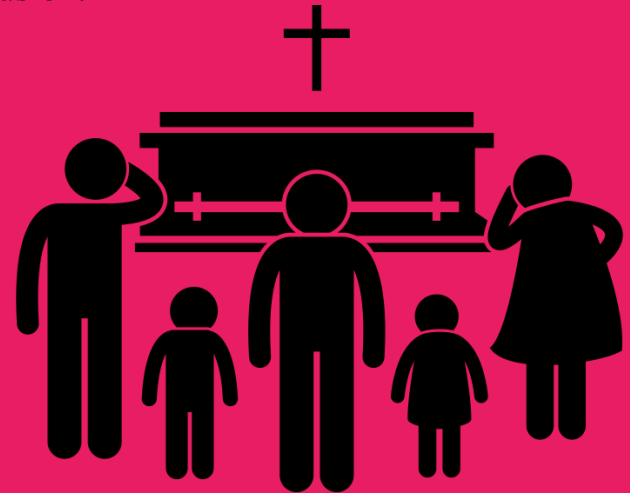
Myths of Children's Grief



Segal, R. M. (1984). Helping children express grief through symbolic communication. *Social casework*, 65(10), 590-599.

★ Children are better off not attending funerals.

Children benefit from being included if they wish to participate. Asking the child what their preference is gives them some ability to take a situation that has careened out of control and place it back into their realm of oversight. They may indicate that they wish to attend only to find out later that they are not up to the rigors of the ceremony. Let them decide to change their minds. They have a personal relationship with the deceased and need to be given the option of attending each ritual. Being excluded only breeds anger and confusion.



What Grief looks like in:

Adults

Adults may be:

- Somber
- Cry
- Talk
- While adults may have difficulty stopping the intense feelings of grief, children may be just the opposite.

Children

Children may need to:

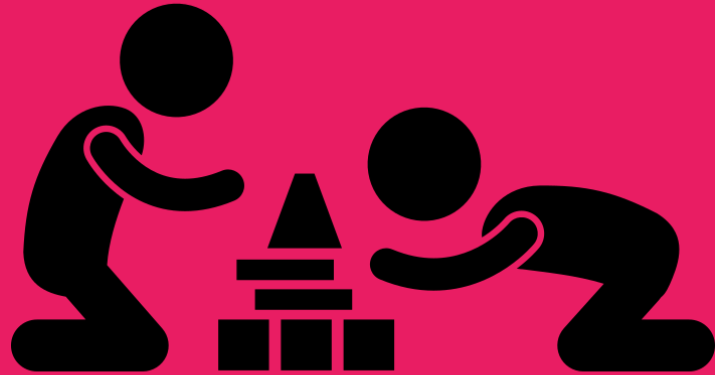
Release physical energy by:

- Running
- Screaming
- Punching a pillow

Children may have grief bursts

- Intense sobbing
- Screaming
- Hitting

Adult Mistake



Adults often mistake children's laughter and play after a loss for not caring or feeling, or worse, for not having loved the person who died. This simply isn't true. Children "dose" their feelings of grief, letting in only what they can handle, a little at a time, until the complete reality seeps in. This process, in the best of circumstances, can take three or four years and persist through several developmental stages (Wolfelt 1996).

Mr. M. Dies



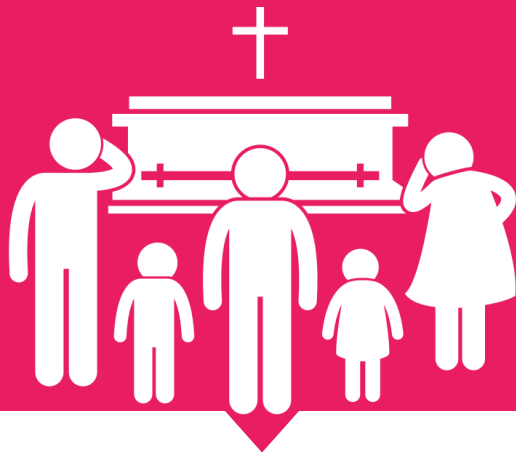
Sesame Street In Communities

There are ways to help families talk about death, express their feelings, and grieve together.

Sesame Street is a production of Sesame Workshop, a nonprofit educational organization.

The Workshop produces Sesame Street programs, seen in over 150 countries, and other acclaimed shows, including The Electric Company. Beyond television, the Workshop produces content for multiple media platforms on a wide range of issues including literacy and numeracy, emotional well-being, health and wellness, and respect and understanding. Learn more at <http://www.sesamestreet.org>.

If you or anyone you know is grieving and would like more resources or to talk to someone, please use the contact information below to reach Board Certified Coach [Melissa James.](#)



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