



Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief Tips for Teachers and Parents

Schools and communities around the country will be impacted by the loss of life associated with the war in Iraq. The effects may be significant for some people because of their emotional closeness to the war and/or their concern over terrorism. How school personnel handle the resulting distress can help shape the immediate and longer-term grieving process for students, staff, and families. Children, in particular, will need the love and support of their teachers and parents to cope with their loss and reach constructive grief resolution.

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- **Emotional shock** and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- **Regressive (immature) behaviors**, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- **Explosive emotions and acting out behavior** that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- **Asking the same questions over and over**, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones. Some of these recommendations come from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

- **Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:** Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- **Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings:** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- **Grieving is a process, not an event:** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.

- ***Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event:*** Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- ***Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death:*** Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- ***Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death:*** Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- ***Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:*** We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- ***Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:*** Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.
- ***Children will need long-lasting support:*** The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.
- ***Keep in mind that grief work is hard:*** It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- ***Understand that grief work is complicated:*** Deaths that result from a terrorist act or war can bring forth many issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Grieving may also be complicated by a need for vengeance or justice and by the lack of resolution of the current situation: the conflict may continue and the nation may still feel at risk. The sudden or violent nature of the death or the fact that some individuals may be considered missing rather than dead can further complicate the grieving process.
- ***Be aware of your own need to grieve:*** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

Developmental Phases in Understanding Death

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

- ***Infants and Toddlers:*** The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death.
- ***Preschoolers:*** Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of death. For instance, as a result of the World Trade Center disaster, some children may imagine that going into tall buildings may cause someone's death.

- **Early Elementary School:** Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. In case of war images, young children may not be able to differentiate between what they see on television, and what might happen in their own neighborhood. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5-6—if jet planes don't fly, then people don't die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.
- **Middle School:** Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.
- **High School:** Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

Tips for Children and Teens with Grieving Friends and Classmates

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this "secondary" loss.

- Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under "helping children cope."
- Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings, particularly for students who have family in the military or other risk related professions. Children need reassurance from caregivers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., "Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route....") and what to expect (see "expressions of grief" above).
- Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their "regular" friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings,

helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.

- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.
- Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend's loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

Resources for Grieving and Traumatized Children

At times of severe stress, such as the trauma of war or terrorist attacks, both children and adults need extra support. Children who are physically and emotionally closest to this tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated by these treacherous acts. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

Resources to help you identify symptoms of severe stress and grief reactions are available at the National Association of School Psychologists' website— www.nasponline.org. See also:

For Caregivers

- Deaton, R.L. & Berkan, W.A. (1995). *Planning and managing death issues in the schools: A handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Mister Rogers Website: www.misterrogers.org (see booklet on Grieving for children 4-10 years)
- Webb, N.B. (1993). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Wolfelt, A. (1983). *Helping children cope with grief*. Bristol, PA: Accelerated Development.
- Wolfelt, A. (1997). *Healing the bereaved child: Grief gardening, growth through grief and other touchstones for caregivers*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion.
- Worden, J.W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies*. New York: Guilford Press
- Helping Children Cope With Death, The Dougy Center for Grieving Children, www.dougy.org.

For Children

- Gootman, M.E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies*. Atlanta: Peachtree Publishing. (Ages 9-12).
- Wolfelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. (See also similar titles for teens and adults)

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Parent Resources for Coping with Loss and Grief

Signs and symptoms of stress in children:

- Physical ailments such as stomach aches or headaches
- Separation difficulties (increased attachment to parents, upset about parents leaving for work, not wanting to leave parents to go to school)
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits (loss of appetite, overeating, nightmares)
- Regression to immature behavior (return to bedwetting, thumb sucking, "baby talk") or to a less logical level of reasoning
- Unanticipated periods of crying
- Unspecified anger
- Loss of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in behavior- Withdrawal, Acting Out (aggression, tantrums)
- Joking about the event and making fun of it. Older children may take pleasure in scaring younger children with scary stories and then laughing at the innocence of the young children when the stories are believed.

Although any one behavior in and of itself may not necessarily be cause for alarm, it is important to address any changes you see by talking with the child about them. You need to try to communicate in a calm, caring and open manner that there is nothing too sad or too terrible to talk about with a caring adult and that they are not alone. It is important to keep in mind that there are no right or wrong feelings; therefore, you need to accept a child's feelings without making value judgments.

Warning signs that a child may need help coping:

- Extended and/or extreme instances of the above behaviors. Severe and long lasting and getting in the way of everyday life
- Extreme withdrawal
- Continual weeping or crying
- Persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event through intense recollections or dreams

- Prolonged lack of interest in their usual activities
- Risk-taking (putting oneself in dangerous situations)
- Suicidal talk or actions

Grieving:

- The style of grieving will differ depending on the age of the child, the relationship with the person who died, the suddenness of the death, etc.
- Grieving involves many feelings such as sadness, anger, abandonment, ambivalence, guilt, blame, etc.
- There is no one way or right way to grieve. All feelings must be validated.
- Children grieve in spurts. They will re-grieve through adolescence. It is important to be aware of the anniversary date of the death and other significant dates to the bereaved child.
- Children can grieve out of sync with others in the family.
- Adolescents grieve with their peers.

Commemorating:

- Commemorating is formally or informally remembering the person who died.
- Confirms the reality of the death and the value of human life.
- Involves student/faculty in the planning of the commemoration
- Do not dismiss school as a commemoration.
- All life must be commemorated. All life has value.
- Prepare the children and adolescents for rituals such as wakes and funerals.

Going on:

- Returning comfortably to regular activities
- Easiest and healthiest after the tasks of understanding, grieving and commemorating, although all tasks are circular, not linear, they can be revisited.
- Anticipate pain at anniversaries, and special times of remembering

- Going on is not about forgetting or loving that person any less
- Going on is a way we commemorate the life of a loved one.



Developmental Phases in Understanding Death:

Pre-adolescent (Ages 9-12)

- They have a more adult understanding of death. Death is final, irreversible and universal.
- They often see death as punishment for bad behavior, an acute sense of right and wrong
- They still revert to magical thinking
- They understand the biological aspects of death. Death is seen as an internal dysfunction that causes life to end.
- They are interested in the rituals for both pets and people
- They are concerned about how their world will change due to a particular death
- They tend to intellectualize death – Their thoughts are more available than their feelings. They want to keep life calm, they do not want to lose control. Sick humor as well as words like yeah, big deal, and so what, are often used.
- Drawings may include broken hearts, tears or barren trees as symbols

Adolescents (Ages 13-19)

- The normal adolescent tasks of separating from parents, establishing their own sexual identity, establishing their own value system, morality and career goals are complicated when a death occurs.
- They tend to distance themselves from the possibility of their own death
- They defy fate by engaging in high-risk activities. They drive fast, use drugs, alcohol, etc.

- They try to make sense out of life and death. They can be very philosophical as they "reconstruct" themselves. They need to make meaning of their tears.
- They observe and explore society's attitudes about life and death. They may observe their own rituals. They need to be together with their peers.
- This is a time for powerful emotions vs. lifelong behavioral expectations.
- A death of a friend shatters all fantasies of immortality.
- They tend to deny the physical consequences of suicide.
- They do not want to be different.

Additional resources:

<http://www.hopkintonma.gov/home/government/departments/youth>

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/coping-with-stress-2013-508.pdf>

<http://www.bmc.org/pediatrics-goodgrief/tipsforadults.htm>

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/griefwar.pdf

http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/age_related_reactions_to_a_traumatic_event.pdf

Children & Bereavement

The following is a guide to understanding a child's concept of death and common grief reactions based on age. Many other factors besides age and developmental level affect a child's concept of death and experience of grief including personality, life experiences, culture, level of support, religious/philosophical beliefs, etc. This information is presented as a guide based on age, not as a strict tool.

6-8 Years of Age

Developmental Stage	Concept of Death	Common Reaction to Loss and Change	How Adults Can Help
<p>PHYSICAL ASPECTS Consolidating physical development.</p> <p>EMOTIONAL ASPECTS Working towards autonomy and responsibility.</p> <p>COGNITIVE ASPECTS Seeking causal explanations to "why" questions. Experiment with their perception and experience of the world through fantasy and play.</p> <p>BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS Social assimilation into the culture. Transition from family and home to peers and school.</p>	<p>Dying and death are identified with the dead but still personified. Death is kept at a distance and externalized, associated with old age and illness.</p> <p>The fear of death is also associated with a fear of loss of the self, an early preview of life crisis (i.e., leaving home, middle age, and old age)</p> <p>DRAWINGS Symbols associated with the dark, water, sleep, emptiness, rebirth, mutilation, and personification and rituals of death.</p>	<p>PHYSICAL Children may exhibit psychosomatic symptoms and/or depression. They may want to be "of use" practically.</p> <p>EMOTIONAL Children may exhibit a range of emotions, manifest rapid mood changes. Will often try to be brave, do not like to lose control.</p> <p>COGNITIVE There may be evidence of learning difficulties. Play, stories, and drawings will often reveal a child's inner feelings and fears.</p> <p>BEHAVIORAL Regression may accompany stress. May become withdrawn or act out in anger. May exhibit behavioral difficulties at home or school. May become the "perfect child."</p>	<p>PHYSICALLY Acknowledge the symptoms and seek professional help when appropriate. Enable the child to help and give comfort to others.</p> <p>EMOTIONALLY Acknowledge that you know that it is very hard for him/her at the moment and it is understandable if he/she feels upset, etc. Reassure the child that he/she will always be cared for by someone.</p> <p>COGNITIVELY Seek and offer help at school as appropriate. Give short, honest, concrete explanations to questions and encourage children to see the body, attend the funeral, draw, etc. and to discuss concerns if needed.</p> <p>BEHAVIORALLY Allow short term regression and dependence on parents & other adults. Give clear boundaries and limits to inappropriate behaviors. Inform school, etc.</p>

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9-12 Years of Age

Developmental Stage	Concept of Death	Common Reaction to Loss and Change	How Adults Can Help
<p>PHYSICAL ASPECTS Relatively stable.</p> <p>EMOTIONAL ASPECTS Gaining a sense of self outside the family, a place in the world. Questioning parents' judgments, faulty arguments are inconsistencies.</p> <p>COGNITIVE ASPECTS Beginning to rationalize events. Shift from concrete towards abstract thought. Can project back into the past and forward into the future.</p> <p>BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS Beginning to understand the rules of society.</p>	<p>Dying and death are identified with the dead but still personified. Death is kept at a distance and externalized, associated with old age and illness.</p> <p>DRAWINGS Display common and individual concerns about own mortality and fear of death. Interest in violent deaths. Death is represented in abstract terms (i.e., blackness, emptiness).</p>	<p>PHYSICAL Children may exhibit psychosomatic symptoms (stomachaches, headaches, etc.) and/or depression.</p> <p>EMOTIONAL Children usually manifest a more stable, surprisingly calm and accepting response to death and loss.</p> <p>COGNITIVE Can rationalize the death and loss. Can think retrospectively about what has happened and imagine the possible implications for the future.</p> <p>BEHAVIORAL Will normally respond appropriately, although there may be some changed behaviors.</p>	<p>PHYSICALLY Take symptoms seriously. Give children reassurance that help and support are available.</p> <p>EMOTIONALLY Allow children to give comfort and help without making too many "adult" demands. Encourage and enable children to talk about the deceased and the implication of the loss. Allow children to express their feelings, and do not hide adult feelings from them.</p> <p>COGNITIVELY Give clear, truthful answers about the manner of dying and death, and be honest if the answer is not known.</p> <p>BEHAVIORALLY Allow for some behavioral abbreviations and seek professional help if concerned. Inform school, etc.</p>

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13-18 Years of Age

Developmental Stage	Concept of Death	Common Reaction to Loss and Change	How Adults Can Help
<p>PHYSICAL ASPECTS Bodily changes from childhood to adulthood are often very stressful.</p> <p>EMOTIONAL ASPECTS Seeking to establish a unique identity. Need to find meaning and purpose in life. Feeling that they have deep and powerful emotions which no one else has experienced.</p> <p>COGNITIVE ASPECTS Data gathering to gain understanding of philosophical, existential and intellectual issues.</p> <p>BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS Acting out behaviors for feelings that are unrecognized and difficult to express. Testing out parental values and society's rules.</p>	<p>Difficulty in recognizing the personal implications of mortality (as opposed to awareness of own death) because they have a sense of being immortal. Becoming "adult" is associated with participation in a range of experiences and activities which range from challenging to potentially lethal.</p>	<p>PHYSICAL May exhibit psychosomatic, stress and/or depressive symptoms. Increased concern and distress regarding physiological body changes.</p> <p>EMOTIONAL Regression and dependence and/or taking on an adult role. Feelings of loneliness, sadness, despair, anger, guilt, hostility, rejection. May either have a sense of seeing no meaning or purpose in life and/or may see the situation as a challenge to be overcome.</p> <p>COGNITIVE Difficulty in concentration. Poor or changes motivation regarding learning. May have an excessive interest or lack of involvement in important issues.</p> <p>BEHAVIORAL Exaggerated acting out behaviors, often masking fears with joking, sarcasm, or withdrawal.</p>	<p>PHYSICALLY Take concerns seriously and seek professional help as appropriate. Involve teenager in the care before death as appropriate and in practical consideration before and afterwards, but avoid making excessive demands of responsibility.</p> <p>EMOTIONALLY Give as much comfort and support as possible. Take feelings seriously and reassure them that their extremes of feelings are normal. Maintain privacy and modesty. Give teenagers space and respect.</p> <p>COGNITIVELY Enable teenagers to verbalize beliefs, concerns, & opinions. Demonstrate an interest in what seems important to them. Avoid idealizing the deceased.</p> <p>BEHAVIORALLY Set limits to acting out behaviors and set boundaries (preferably jointly). Inform school, etc.</p>

Manifestations of Grief

IN YOUTH

Behavior/Social	Emotional
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regressive behaviors (returning to a behavior from an earlier period) – i.e., bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, clinging, tantrums 2. Aggressive behaviors (hitting, demanding) 3. Rebellious/Defiant behaviors 4. Withdrawal/Passivity 5. Hyperactivity 6. Temporary assumption of a new role or personality often related to that which was lost (identification) 7. Increased need for reassurance (i.e., clinging and not wanting to initiate or leave home) 8. Hoarding (food, toys, etc.) 9. Changes in eating patterns (more or less) 10. Changes in sleeping patterns (more or less) 11. Lowered grades (due to difficulty in concentration and attendance) 12. "Perfect" child syndrome 13. "Bad" child syndrome 14. Drug use increase 15. Sexual promiscuity 16. Heckless or self-destructive behavior 17. Crying 18. Non-stop talking/attention-getting 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-blame and guilt: "I caused it to happen." "I could have prevented it." 2. Fear of the dark, going to sleep, new places and experiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Who will take care of me now?" "Will it happen to me, too?" "Will people care about me?" "Will I have to pay the price?" "Will God punish me?" 3. Numbness 4. Withdrawal 5. Demanding 6. Helpless/hopeless 7. Despair 8. Yearning and pining 9. Unaccepting 10. Pensive 11. Anger 12. Anger disguised as general irritation 13. Sadness 14. Anxious 15. Bored 16. Apathy
Physical	Cognitive
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Changes in appetite 2. Sleep disturbances or changes 3. Bowel and bladder disturbances 4. Temporary slowing of reactions 5. Headaches 6. Stomach aches 7. Rashes 8. Breathing disturbances 9. Exaggeration of allergies 10. Increased number of colds and infections 11. Symptoms associated with illness or injury of the deceased 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Impaired self esteem 2. Disturbances in cognitive functioning (attention deficit, hyperactivity) 3. Exaggerations in "magical thinking" ("I made it happen.") 4. Loss-centered thinking 5. Avoidance and denial of the loss 6. Idealization of the past 7. Idealization of the future 8. Idealization (unrealistic thinking) related to the loss 9. Increase in nightmares/dreams
<p>Source: Donna O'Toole, <i>Growing Through Grief</i>, 1989</p>	

Common Fears & Questions

OF GRIEVING CHILDREN

- What happened?
- Was it my fault?
- Did I do something bad?
- Am I going to die?
- Are you going to die?
- Will others I love die?
- How old are you?
- Who will take care of me?
- What does dead mean?
- Why do people die?
- Where do people go when they die?
- Where is heaven?
- How can someone be underground and in heaven at the same time?
- Can I go too?
- Don't people get cold, hungry, or scared underground?
- Why would God take him/her away?
- When is (deceased's name) coming back?

Children have limited cognitive and verbal abilities and grief can be an overwhelming experience. They may or may not be able to directly communicate the above listed fears and questions. However, sensitive ears and eyes will be able to pick up on these themes in whatever forms they may appear. Even if there is no noticeable communication of these fears, chances are that some are there.

One might even say to a bereaved child, "When my grandmother died, I began to worry that other people I loved might die, too. I'm wondering if you have ever worried about that." Statements such as these do not put fears into children that do not exist. They will either tell you no, or, more likely, will grab the opportunity to hear an adult acknowledge and address this fear.

Acknowledging children's fears normalizes their experience and allows them to explore their fears and receive support. Remember, children have fantastic imaginations and will create their own answers when they can't find them elsewhere.



Helping Children Cope

WITH GRIEF EMOTIONS

Listed below are some of the most common grief emotions and some specific activities to help children cope.

Anger

- Help your child identify specific things or people that make him/her angry.
- Modeling clay or playdough is great for relieving stress; have your child sculpt what makes him/her angry, then pound it flat.
- Suggest physical activity to deal with anger.
- Run around the yard
- Punch a pillow
- Scream in a closed room
- Kick a soccer ball
- Have your child let out anger into a tape recorder and then listen to himself expressing his anger.
- Suggest that your child write a letter to whomever he or she is angry with and then rip it up.

Guilt

- Have your child draw a picture of something that happened and that he/she now wished had happened differently.
- Make paper bag puppets (one of the child and one of the deceased) so your child can "talk" to his/her loved one and apologize or discuss their regrets.
- Write a letter to his/her loved one stating the regrets.
- Suggest that your child make his/her "confession" into a tape recorder and then erase it.
- Help your child recall all of the good things he/she has done.
- Help your child write his/her secret message onto a small strip of paper, attach it to a helium balloon, and then release his/her guilt into the air.

Sadness/Depression

- Reminisce by drawing a favorite memory.
- Make a collage out of magazine pictures that remind your child of his loved one.
- Look at photographs.
- Make a home video in which your child interviews other family members about their memories of his/her loved one.
- Talk about "keepsakes" that your child has selected to remember his/her loved one.
- Put together a scrapbook which can include: Photos, Newspaper clippings, Cards, Drawings

Fears

- Help your child identify specific fears and address them one at a time.
- Title a blank paper, "I worry about..." or "I am afraid of..." and then have your child draw a corresponding picture.
- Talk to your child about any nightmares.
- Draw the dream and then draw an acceptable ending for it.
- Help your child write his/her fears on the outside of a helium balloon, then release the balloon and fears into the sky.
- Keep daily routines and discipline consistent.
- Provide lots of hugs and safe touching.

Helping Grieving Children

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

1. Be aware of personal loss issues.

Our own experiences with death and grief can have a major impact on how we respond to our children.

2. Establish and maintain contact with the school.

Children spend many hours of their day at school. The more you can learn from teachers and school counselors, the better you will be able to provide support at home. Likewise, the more you can share with teachers about what you are observing at home, the better equipped the teachers will be.

3. Approach the topic of death and grief with your children.

If you tell children, "Let me know if you need to talk," there is a good chance they won't. Children are often uncomfortable initiating conversations about an emotionally laden topic, especially if they think it might upset their parents. Reach out to them and let them know it is okay to talk to you.

4. Keep in mind the developmental level of the child and begin there.

Younger children need simple, concrete definitions and explanations.

5. Use proper terminology

Such as cancer, death, died, etc. Avoid euphemisms like gone away, passed on, eternal rest, left us, etc. Abstract phrases such as these can confuse children.

6. Use the deceased person's name or title

(i.e., Mother).

7. Listen.

Let the child's questions guide you. Answer with a question until you understand exactly what the child is asking.

8. Review your conversation.

Ask the child to summarize what he/she heard you say. This provides opportunities to clarify misconceptions.

9. Be patient.

Remember, children may ask the same questions or tell the same stories over and over again as they process and adjust to their loss.

10. Avoid saying, "I know exactly how you feel."

Relate to the child's feelings, but do not take ownership of them.

11. Remember that grief may be intermittent.

Children grow up with their loss and may have reactions at various points of their development regardless of how long ago the loss occurred. Also, be aware of the resurfacing of emotions around important days of the year such as birthdays, holidays, and the anniversary of the death.

Helping Grieving Children

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

12. Grief is often exhibited through behaviors.

Children need the structure of their normal routine, adult role models, appropriate limit-setting, and discipline. However, grieving children also need affection and security. The need to hear that we understand and that we care about them despite their acting-out behaviors.

13. Watch for academic decline.

Keep in mind that grieving children may not be well rested due to insomnia, sleep interruptions, and dreams. They may have trouble concentrating and getting their homework done. Offer to assist them with homework or see if the school can recommend a good tutor.

14. Share your thoughts, concerns, and feelings.

Children learn what is acceptable from parents/guardians. Give them permission to grieve by allowing them to see you grieve.

15. Reassure the child the death is not their fault.

Children often think something they did or thought must have somehow caused the death to happen.

16. Remember, loss and grief are unique.

Allow children to teach you what their loss means to them.

17. Encourage and provide opportunities for the expression of feelings.

Communicate that it is okay to express emotions. Use children's natural expressive outlets such as stories. Encourage and provide opportunities for the expression of feelings. Utilize children's natural expressive means such as stories, art, games, play, and music to stimulate expression and conversation.

18. Share your religious and spiritual beliefs with your child.

Children may become angry with God. Let them know that this is a normal reaction that happens to some people. Reassure them that God still loves them and will use time, love, and the special people in their lives to help them through their anger and pain.

19. It is okay to say, "I don't know" to your child.

Nobody has all the answers. There are some things beyond our understanding.

20. Do not be afraid to seek grief support for your child.

Individual support can address personal loss issues, and support groups can help children feel less isolated and different from others their age.

Reference: Fitzgerald, Helen. The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide, New York: Simon & Schuster 1992.

How Can I Tell IF MY CHILD NEEDS COUNSELING?

First of all, trust your instincts. If your gut feeling tells you a child needs additional support, work to get that help for him. Many of the signs and symptoms of complicated grief are the same responses we see in normal grief. What makes these "red flags" is a matter of degree. Fear and/or anger, for example, are normal grief reactions. Persistent or prolonged fear or anger, however, is symptomatic of unmet mourning needs. If the child is progressing in his or her grief journey, reactions should soften in intensity and duration over time.

Signs of Normal Grief	Signs of Complicated Grief or Clinical Depression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually connect depressed feelings to the death. • Disbelief, denial, shock • Often openly angry. • Sense of unreality, withdrawal from others. • Disruption of typical behavior patterns or personality. • Children respond to comfort and support. • Can still experience moments of enjoyment in life. • Adults can sense sadness and emptiness in the child. • Often have transient physical complaints. • May express guilt over some aspect of the loss. • Self-esteem temporarily impacted, but is intact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often do not relate depressed feelings to any life event. • Total denial of the reality of the death. • May suppress anger. May complain and be irritable, but may not directly express anger. • May be persistently angry and hostile. • Consistent withdrawal from family and friends. • Prolonged change in behavior or personality. • Often reject support. • Often project a pervasive sense of doom. • Often project a sense of hopelessness and chronic emptiness. • May have chronic physical complaints or actual medical illness. • Often have prolonged feelings of guilt over the death or generalized feelings of guilt. • Typically a deep loss of esteem. May use drugs & alcohol. • Suicidal thoughts or actions.

So once you determine a grieving child may benefit from counseling, how do you tell her/him? Talk to the child with compassion and understanding. Many children and adults associate counseling as something for people who have something wrong with them. Assure children that they are not crazy or abnormal. Explain that, just as there are people like doctors and nurses who can help with physical pain such as a broken arm, there are people who can help with the pain of grief.

*References: Wolfelt, Alan. Healing the Bereaved Child, Fort Collins, Colorado: Companion Press.
Simons, R.C. Understanding Human Behavior in Health and Illness, Baltimore, Maryland: Williams and Wilkins.*

Books for Children & Teens

Dealing with Illness, Grief & Loss

Frahm, Amelia (2001). Tickle Jabitha's Cancer-Jackpotous Mommy. Nutcracker Publishing Company.
Told through Jabitha's eyes, this book uses candor and comic reality to dispel stereotypes and acknowledge the moody truths faced by families living with cancer.

Hoegaard, Marge (1991). When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness. Minneapolis, MN: Woodland Press
This is a workbook created to help young children understand and accept the changes in their lives when a loved one is diagnosed with a life threatening illness.

Le Shan, Eda (1987). When a Parent is Very Sick. Little Brown and Co.
This book identifies the many responses a young person might have to a parent's illness, hospitalization, or death.

Nurneroff, Laura, & Harpham, Wendy (1999). The Hope Tree. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster
Various kids describe their feelings and how they cope with their mothers' breast cancer.

Parkinson, Carolyn (1996). Mommys In the Hospital Again. Solace Publishing.
An honest caring depiction of how life can go on successfully for a child and family despite the painful experiences of dealing with the unpredictable course of mom's illness in a gentle, easily understandable, and non-frightening fashion.

Parkinson, Carolyn (1991). My Mommy Has Cancer. Rochester, NY: Park Press.
A book for young children explaining cancer and why hospitalization is necessary. Written by a mother who has cancer.

Peterkin, Allen (1992). What About Me? New York, NY: Magination Press
A book for siblings when a brother or sister has an illness.

Vigna, Judith (1993). When Eric's Mom Fought Cancer. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.
A ski trip with his father helps a young boy who feels angry and afraid when his mother gets sick with breast cancer.

Specifically Children and Grief

Brown, Laurene Krasny and Brown, Marc Tolon (1995). When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death. Boston. The authors explain in simple language the feelings people may have regarding the death of a loved one and the ways to honor the memory of someone who has died.

Greenlee, Sharon (1993). When Someone Dies. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd.
Great discussion starter. Attempts to describe the "gorneness" created by death. (No more phone calls or birthday cards) Helpful suggestions for remembering and taking care of yourself.

Putlock, Simon and Bartlett, Alison (2001). A Story for Hippo. New York, NY: Scholastic Press.
A gentle and reassuring book for anyone who has ever lost a loved one. With beautiful simplicity, it answers difficult questions that even a very young child can understand and shows us how to keep the spirit of a cherished person alive forever.

Karst, Patrice and Stevenson, Geoff (2000). The Invisible String. Marina Del Rey, Calif.
Author Patrice Karst shows children that they are always loved, whether their parents are near or far. This lesson is perfectly suited for a variety of situations, including for military families while a parent is serving overseas as well as for coping with loss.

Greve, Bradley Trevor (2005). The Blue Day Book for Kids: A Lesson in Cheering Yourself Up. Kansas City, Mo: Andrews McMeel Publishing. The deceptively simple, imaginative story line reflects a child's sensibility about the symptoms, causes, and cures for those times when children feel tired, grumpy, left out, or think that nothing ever goes as they planned.

Books for Children & Teens cont.

Specifically Children and Grief cont.

Kaplow, Julie B. and Pincus, Donna (2007). Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story about Coping with the Loss of a Parent. Washington, DC: Magination. Since her father died, Samantha Jane has become fearful and does not want to acknowledge her grief. Using examples from the natural world this book shows how to acknowledge feelings and give them a proper place in life.

Holmes, Margaret M. and Muzlak, Sasha J. (2003). A Terrible Thing Happened. Washington, DC: Magination. This gently told and tenderly illustrated story is for children who have witnessed any kind of violent or traumatic episode, including physical abuse, school or gang violence, accidents, homicide, suicide, and natural disasters such as floods or fire.

Bostrom, Kathleen Long and Kucenark, Elena (2000). What about Heaven?. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House. The rhythmic rhyming book begins with questions kids ask about heaven and answers each one in a theologically accurate yet age-appropriate manner, including scriptures to reference.

Thomas, Pat (2001). I Miss You. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's. Explores the difficult issue of death for young children.

Johnson, Marvin and Johnson, Joy (2003). Where's Jess? For Children Who have a Brother or Sister Die. Omaha, NE: Centering Resource. A helpful resource for children who have lost a sibling through illustrations and easy to understand text.

Specifically Teens and Grief

Hanson, Warren (1997). The Next Place. Minneapolis, MN: Walchman House. An inspirational journey of light and hope to a place where earthly hurts are left behind.

Lotus, Chris and Gallagher, Catherine (1997). The Boy Who Sat by the Window: Helping Children Cope with Violence. Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon. A story of a small boy whose classmate is killed by random gunfire includes coping skills and restores hope by instilling a message of peace.

Hipp, Earl (1995). Help for the Hard Times. Hazelden. A guide that helps teens understand how they experience grief and loss; how our culture, in general, doesn't often acknowledge their losses or give them tools to grieve; how they can keep their loss from overflowing.

Traisman, Enid Samuel (1992). Fire In My Heart, Ice In My Veins. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation. A journal for teenagers experiencing a loss. Just reading it will let them know that all of their feelings are normal even though some may feel crazy. Writing in it will help them explore their feelings and insure they will never forget.

Noel, Brook and Blair, Pamela (2000). I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping & Healing after the Sudden Death of a Loved One. Vancouver, WA: Champion.

Hugnus, Lynne (2005). You are Not Alone. New York, NY: Scholastic Press. The loss of a parent has been called "the loss that is forever" and young people who have suffered this loss feel especially different than those around them. This book reaches out to teens and people who care for them with understanding and compassion. Frank and accessible testimonials, along with discussion of what helps, what doesn't, what "sinks," and ways to stay connected to loved ones.

Wolcott, Alan (2001). Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press. When you are a teen, the death of someone you love can be especially difficult. Being a teen is hard enough; being a grieving teen can feel completely overwhelming. This book was written to help teens understand and deal with their unique grief. It gives many really simple, practical ideas and suggested activities.

Books for Adults

HELPING CHILDREN & TEENS AFFECTED BY GRIEF OR LIFE-THREATENING ILLNESS

Fitzgerald, Helen (1992). [The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide](#). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

A wonderful, readable book for parents to help understand how grief is different for children. Great suggestions for processing feelings, both within and without a group.

Haney, Sue et. al (2001). [Cancer in the Family](#). Atlanta, GA: American Cancer Society.

This book outlines valuable steps necessary to help children understand what happens when a parent has been diagnosed with cancer. "Hands-on-tools" help those affected by cancer, as well as their loved ones, face many of the dilemmas that come with the disease. A specially illustrated workbook designed just for kids helps even the youngest children record their thoughts and feelings so they can learn how to navigate through this emotional time.

Huntley, Theresa (1991). [Helping Children Grieve](#). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.

This book will help you listen to children, answer their questions, and guide them in coping with their feelings. Also included are ideas for dealing with behavior changes that often accompany a child's grief.

Linn, Erin (1990). [150 Facts About Grieving Children](#). The Publisher's Mark.

Children do grieve, and with an intensity that would astound many adults. We are obligated to learn more about a child's bereavement. We must begin to understand their world, their feelings, and their hurts.

McCue, Kathleen (1996). [How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness](#). St. Martin's Griffin.

A thorough, but quick guide for parents and professionals, from diagnosis of an illness to resolution. Each chapter has a wonderful summary at the end. Topics covered include what to tell, how to deal with different ages children, and helpful hints for effective communication.

Wolfeit, Alan (1983). [Helping Children Cope with Grief](#). Accelerated Development, Inc.

Written to assist adults in helping children deal with their thoughts and feelings on death. Especially helpful is its approach to naming and teaching the skills needed to help children share their grief.