



# **CHILDREN & YOUTH TOOLKIT**

## **FOR FUNERAL HOMES**



# GOOD GRIEF

Good Grief provides direct support to grieving children and youth, educates communities, and advocates on behalf of the bereaved. For more, visit: [WWW.GOOD-GRIEF.ORG](http://WWW.GOOD-GRIEF.ORG)

## INTRODUCTION

Working intimately with death and grief is hard work. You witness so much heartbreak, you hear pain and suffering that so few people are exposed to on a daily basis, and you are tasked with the great responsibilities of memorializing and caring for those who are hurting. Your job can be lonely. People can be difficult when they are grieving. And the best way to respond in challenging situations may not always be clear.

In the shuffle of controlled chaos and heavy emotions, there often exist children and youth, who, like you, are witnesses to it all. They may be on the sidelines or they may have front row seats, but no matter what adults are telling them, they are exposed to much of what is unfolding after the death of someone important in their life.

Not only do children and youth see adults in pain, feel the disruption, and have fear about what has happened, they also have huge questions and scary feelings. In order to navigate the death and the funeral, they need support. Children and youth need help from you, who, with all your experience, can support them in making the funeral a meaningful experience.

As a result, Good Grief created this toolkit in support of the Funeral Service Foundation's Youth & Funerals initiative, which addresses the important role funerals and memorialization play in the lives of youth. We want to equip you with what you need to help children and youth with their needs, and help you build meaningful relationships with the families and communities you serve.

While it might be scary to think about at first, the truth of the matter is a grieving child is a child at risk. From the time of death onwards, grieving children and youth are at risk for depression, isolation, toxic stress, obesity, and many other psychosocial issues. But here is the thing. These risks are a result of adults not meeting their needs; they're not inherent risks that come with grief.

You can make an incredible difference in the lives of children and youth because the mitigation of risk factors starts with the funeral.

Funerals provide an incredible opportunity for children and youth to have their needs met because funerals are at the heart of their learning. Unfortunately, as traditions and cultures have evolved, this knowledge and opportunity has been lost. This is likely one of the reasons why Elisabeth Kubler-Ross called children our "forgotten mourners."

In order to ensure children and youth are acknowledged and affirmed as mourners, a paradigm shift needs to be explored. Start by thinking of your funeral home as a classroom. It's a place where children and youth learn what it means to be dead, a place to express and explore all of their feelings, a place where they can identify helpful adults that provide support, and a place to mourn.

A word about grief and mourning and how both transpire in your funeral classroom: Grief is not just a feeling. Grief is a compilation of thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, and spiritual questions. The range of grief responses is wide and they are all natural. Mourning is the outward expression of grief. It's grief in motion. This is very important for us to remember. If children and youth have become "forgotten mourners" it's in part because we haven't given them the space to draw, create, and memorialize in their own way, language, and on their own terms.

The resources offered through the Foundation's Youth & Funerals initiative were created in collaboration with funeral service professionals and grief and bereavement experts committed to helping families and caregivers understand the important role funerals and memorialization play in the lives of youth. The tools are for you, your colleagues, and your community.

## HOW TO USE THESE RESOURCES

The tools work together to give a voice to grieving children and youth, normalize their experience, emphasize the importance of including children and youth, and empower families by hearing from the greatest experts of all: kids.

### *Children & Youth Toolkit*

This toolkit is designed to lighten your load by providing the tools, tips and resources you need to empower children and youth and equip adults.

### *e-Book & Customizable Booklet*

The Foundation's customizable booklet and e-book are guides for you to distribute to families with children and youth, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. It's a roadmap for their decision-making, which will hopefully always prepare and include children and youth in the funeral.

### *Video*

For those situations where a parent or adult is receiving misinformation from well-intended but uninformed peers or are genuinely fearful of hurting their child and wanting to do right by them, the Youth & Funerals video does the work for you. A childhood bereavement expert and children and youth themselves speak to the importance of funerals and how attending the funeral for their parent made a difference in their grief and life.

The video is not just for adults who are hesitant to include children and youth, it can be of great comfort to any grieving parent because it shows children and youth thriving after experiencing a devastating loss.

- ♥ POST THIS VIDEO ON YOUR WEBSITE
- ♥ DIRECT FAMILIES TO IT BEFORE MAKING ARRANGEMENTS SO THAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE INCLUDED FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.
- ♥ VIEW THE VIDEO WITH THE FAMILY DURING ARRANGEMENTS



## WHY TO USE THESE RESOURCES

The kids.

First and foremost, the kids. Even today, in a world where information and best practices are so easily accessible people are often confused and overwhelmed when it comes to effectively supporting kids. Many people in professional helping roles, such as counselors, teachers, clergy, and funeral directors too, have not been effectively trained on this subject. As a result, many depend on misinformed and well-intentioned intuition. Unfortunately, best intentions don't fully consider the needs of children and youth. So we're providing you with the resources you need to respond appropriately.

You have such an important role in the lives in children, youth and families. We acknowledge that this resource may ask more from you, but we sincerely believe a change in approach will deeply benefit our profession, your work, and your role in the community.

# WHEN TO USE THESE RESOURCES

These resources are best used when you are prepared in advance of needing them. Strive for working knowledge and familiarity with the content. Your understanding of this material will require you to work less at the time of need and maximize your impact because it will become a natural part of how you support families.

This resource will be helpful whenever there are children and youth involved in the life of the deceased or may be in attendance at the funeral.

This is most beneficial for a family that has experienced the death of a:



CHILD



PARENT



GRANDPARENT

However, you never know when a child is going to walk through your doors. Consider leveraging these resources with every family.



## BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT

Grief is not just an **emotional** response. Grief is full of competing, heavy, confusing, conflicting, and indescribable feelings, but it is also a physical, spiritual, and intellectual response to losing someone you love. Grief is love turned upside down. Kids struggle with articulating the scary feelings that accompany death. When they cannot find words to express their feelings children often have **physical** responses, like headaches and bellyaches. They struggle concentrating in school.

Grief is also a **spiritual** experience as a child wrestles with how and why this bad thing happened. Religion may serve a role here or it may not depending on the family. Nonetheless, the question of "why this happened" can be strong and overwhelming. Funerals can provide the opportunity for this questioning, meaning-making, and filling in the answers to their questions.

And, lastly, grief is an **intellectual** experience. For kids, they need to understand what it means to be dead. This requires honesty and truth. No lies, not even fibs, are helpful. Facts, honesty, clear language (not metaphors) and other points of reference (past experiences with death such as pet loss, movies such as Disney which engages death in most movies, etc) are all critical to understanding someone is dead and not returning. Without this information, kids will grieve with false information and then need to re-grieve once they discover the truth. See *5 Tips for Teaching Children and Youth About Death tip sheet*.

In order to be most effective at supporting a child in these four areas, consider a tone and approach that doesn't assume what this experience is like for the child. Start from ground zero and with an inquisitive spirit. From the beginning, try to understand what this person meant to the child. Discover what the child liked to do with the person. Identify favorite memories or commonly told stories. Treat the child normally and allow him to be comfortable and inquisitive at the funeral home. See *Introducing the Conversation*.

“Grief is love turned upside down.”

## GENERAL CONCERNS

Sometimes we forget how powerful culture is at influencing children and youth's ideas and perceptions. This is a generation with access to a lot of information from videos, social media, and Google searches. Try to be mindful that the child in front of you was forged within a culture and community, which will influence their perception and reactions to the funeral. Despite the influencers on a child's grief, such as family, culture, community, religion, ethnicity, etc., they will have many internal tools to navigate this experience. Those internal tools are what we want to lean on.

A child's resilience and ability to cope will rely on the extent to which a child is:

- ♥ empowered to explore
- ♥ ask questions
- ♥ touch
- ♥ share openly
- ♥ feel that they matter
- ♥ have their feelings affirmed, and
- ♥ be included

## MISINFORMATION

Unfortunately, our culture is afraid to engage grief. We tend to label it as something bad because it is hard and scary. As a result, the majority of people do not have a language for talking effectively about emotions or their mortality. As a result, folklore, myths, stereotypes, and misinformation have consumed our culture. Children and youth are the victims of this misinformation. This tool is our response to the challenges that have been created for children and youth.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR BEING THE BEST ADVOCATE

The best advocate for a child tries to understand the context in which a child is living. You are seeing families through an intimate lens, as they are vulnerable and often unguarded. As a witness to their family dynamic, you have the opportunity to frame the conversation in a way that is meaningful to children and youth. In other words, by listening carefully to what the adults are saying, you can help frame these issues to an adult, on a child's behalf.

## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

How a child understands and responds to death depends on their developmental stages. While one cannot say that all 5-year-olds will respond the same, one can anticipate some generalities. Most 3-year-olds are concrete thinkers and don't understand the finality of death; whereas, most 11-year-olds are fascinated by the details (sometimes grisly stuff) of the death. These are all normal reactions, even if they make adults uncomfortable. How you interact with a teen is not the same as an elementary school kid, though the needs are generally similar. See *Grief in Developmental Stages tip sheet*.

**“Funerals are not adult activities.  
They are *human* activities.”**





## BE CREATIVE. INSPIRE.

In order to provide children and youth and families with a positive experience that meets their needs, creativity and openness are critical. They're also at the heart of showing your value to the community. No one can do this like you, if you're well-informed and prepared. While this may feel different or even uncomfortable, it is important to consider rituals, i.e. mourning, that are not "traditional" or common. You may be wonderfully surprised and inspired by how a child approaches death and ritual when given tools and permission.

## ANTICIPATING QUESTIONS

Many adults make decisions from a place of fear rather than how to best meet the needs of children and youth. Because many adults are fearful of death they make assumptions about what kids need. Adults are concerned that exposing children to death or being honest will traumatize them. Fear makes grief harder and worse for kids. Protection is not one of their needs.

Some of the questions you should anticipate include:

- How do I tell my children and youth?
- Is my child going to be traumatized?
- Should my child attend the funeral?
- What do I do with the kids during the wake and funeral?
- How do I explain death to my child?
- My in-laws don't think the children and youth should participate. What do I do?
- My friends want to bring their children and youth. What do I tell them?
- I don't think my child can handle this. What do you think?

**What are your answers to these questions? Write them down and then see our suggested answers and considerations at the end of this toolkit.**

Grieving children need supportive relationships, but as time goes on, the impact of grief and loss intensifies as support wanes.



**A FUNERAL BRINGS THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER AND BUILDS SUPPORT FOR TODAY AND THE FUTURE.**



# SCRIPTS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH



**IN FUNERAL HOMES**

# INTRODUCING THE CONVERSATION (PART I)

If children and youth are NOT brought to the arrangement conference, consider these steps for engaging the adults.



## ACKNOWLEDGE

You know, from all of your work and experience, that this is hard for most people. Acknowledge it by naming it. It will help you build trust.

**Say:** I understand that this might be overwhelming or you might be unsure how to include the kids. They are important and the funeral is important for them.



## PULSE CHECK

Don't make assumptions. People can surprise you.

**Ask:** What are the ages of the children and youth who might be attending and/or participating in the funeral?

**Ask:** What are your concerns with the kids?

**Ask:** Have you given any thought to how you would like to include them?



## EDUCATE

Provide the Youth & Funerals guide to the family. Walk them through a few content areas that are most relevant to their concerns and needs. Consider watching the video with them. This may prompt a lot of tears. In time, after the video has concluded:

**Ask:** What stuck out for you in the video? Were there parts you found helpful?

**Say:** One of the things I like most about the video is how powerful the kids are. Even though this is so hard, they can do this and we want to help.



## COLLECT INFORMATION

When the family is ready, ask them to share about the kids. *Choose the questions you are most comfortable with.*

**Ask:** What are your children and youth like?

**Ask:** What are they struggling with since this happened?

**Ask:** How are their friends responding?

**Listen Carefully:** Adults will start to give you clues. Listen for interests, nature of the relationship with person who died, memories, temperament, etc. These will help you suggest creative ways to include children and youth. But remember, don't make assumptions- even the most shy child can deliver the most gorgeous eulogy you have ever heard.



## PROVIDE TOOLS AND EDUCATE

Now that you've learned about their concerns, heard about the child(ren), and have a greater understanding of the key issues, it's time to troubleshoot. Identify education needs, opportunities for inclusion, and next steps. Here is your checklist of questions to ask and things to consider:

### EDUCATION

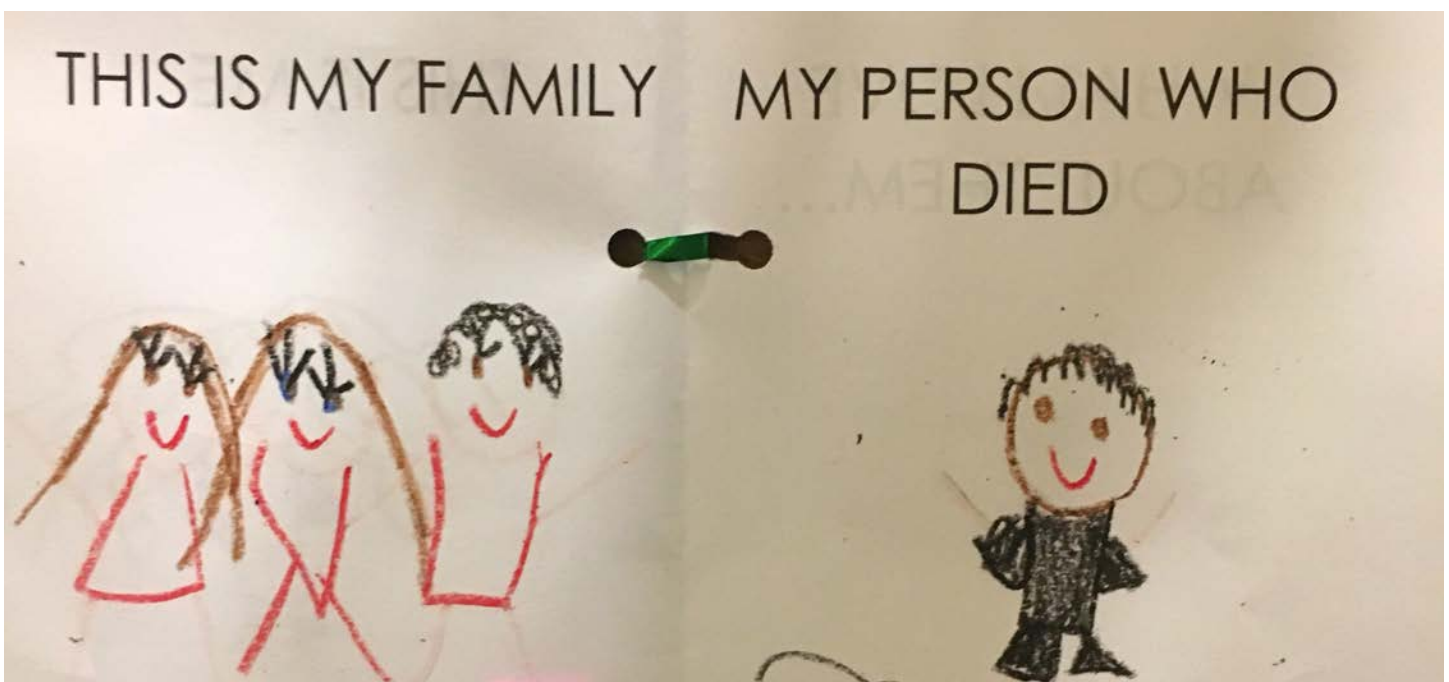
- What do the children and youth understand about what happened?
- Do you think they understand death?
- Do you need help talking to them about death?
- Do you need help preparing them for what they'll see and hear over the next several days?

### PLACES FOR INCLUSION

- Pallbearers
- Eulogy
- Decorate the casket
- Join discussion on choices: clothes, music, liturgy, flowers
- Invite their friends
- Create their own special place and/or ritual in the funeral home

### NEXT STEPS

- Make sure there is a plan to give children and youth the information they need. Have a check-in to see how conversations and planning went back at home.
- Invite children and youth to come early and have their own time before guests arrive (consider making this a kid's only time if they'd like it) and become familiar with the space.
- Provide materials for children and youth at funeral home:
  - Posters, paper, crayons, etc. for letters and decorating
  - Identify a room or space for children and youth to do their own ritual or have their own time for kids talk/ kid processing



# INTRODUCING THE CONVERSATION (PART II)

If children and youth are included in the arrangement conference, consider the script below.



## ACKNOWLEDGE

Engage and respond to the children and youth present with the same attention as the adults. Welcome them, speak directly to them, and make them feel a part of the entire process.



## ASSESS

As always, don't make assumptions.

**Ask:** Have you ever been to a funeral home before?

**Ask:** What do you think happens here?

**Ask:** Do you have any questions for me?



## EXPLAIN

Fill in the knowledge gaps immediately by briefly letting them know what is going to happen at today's visit.

- We're going to talk about your special person and make some decisions about how you want to remember him/her. We'll start in my office. Maybe you can start by telling me a little about your person.
- We are also going to talk about who is coming to say goodbye to your special person and what we would like to say about him/her when we let everyone know s/he died.
- After we make some decisions we will have a tour of the funeral home.
- Do you have any questions so far?
- We'll visit a room where we have caskets and urns. Have you ever seen a casket or urn and do you know what they are for?
  - A casket is special box in which the dead person's body is placed before burial or cremation. An urn is where the cremated remains are placed after the cremation.



## EDUCATE ADULTS AS NEEDED

Provide the Youth & Funerals guide to the family. Walk them through a few content areas that are most relevant to their concerns and needs. Consider watching the video with them. This may prompt a lot of tears. In time, after the video has concluded:

**Ask:** What stuck out for you in the video? Were there parts you found helpful?

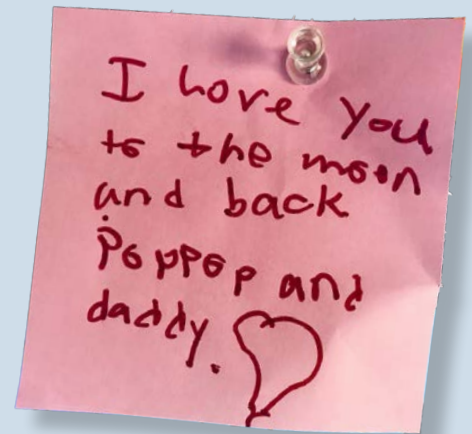
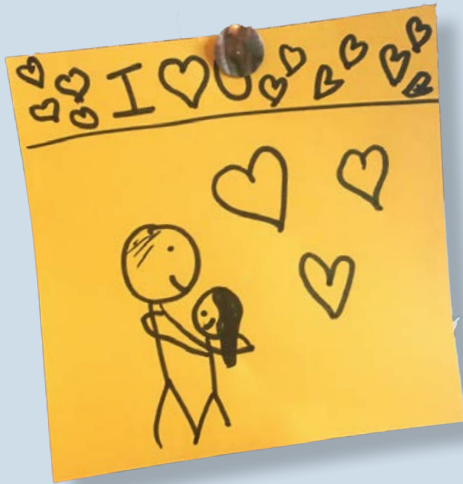
**Say:** One of the things I like most about the video is how powerful the kids are. Even though this is so hard, many other kids have been here. You're not alone even if it feels that way now.



## REMAIN COMMITTED TO YOUR GOALS

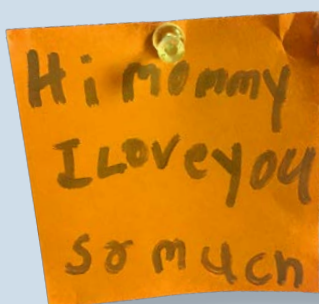
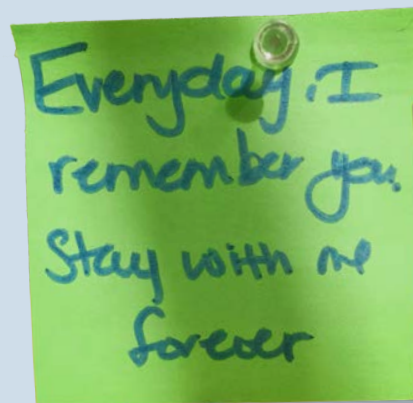
From your first interaction, be mindful of your goals each step of the way. Make these goals part of your culture so every member of your team is interacting with the children and youth consistently.

- Help the child(ren) understand
- Support the adults in finding ways to include children and youth
- Create and provide as many opportunities as possible for children and youth to have a voice and make a contribution
- Acknowledge your "forgotten mourners" throughout the whole process



## GRIEF IS A NORMAL AND NATURAL REACTION TO DEATH.

Love and grief are inseparable - they are yin and yang - so when we lose those we love we experience grief. It is a normal response and it has been a part of the human condition since the beginning of time.



# TIPS SHEETS



**HANDOUTS FOR FAMILIES  
AND STAFF**

# 5

## TIPS FOR TEACHING KIDS ABOUT DEATH

Death is a part of life. Kids know more about it than you might think. Talking openly about death does not negatively impact a child. Rather, it provides opportunities to share, explore, learn, and understand this normal part of the human condition. Teaching children about death gives them the tools they need to navigate the subject when it comes up at school, on TV, on social media, or elsewhere, and prepares them for when a death inevitably happens in their life.

### 1 TALK ABOUT IT BIOLOGICALLY

Death can be boiled down to biology. It is not a metaphor, cliché, or abstract concept. Explaining death needs a foundation in biology. All living things will die. So, start with describing what makes us alive.

a. Ask a child: what do living things do in order to stay alive?

- i. Eat
- ii. Drink
- iii. Sleep
- iv. Shower
- v. Text
- vi. Tweet
- vii. Burp
- viii. Stay warm
- ix. Brush teeth, etc.

b. Tell the child that when we die we no longer need to:

- i. Eat
- ii. Drink
- iii. Sleep
- iv. Shower
- v. Text
- vi. Tweet
- vii. Burp
- viii. Stay warm
- ix. Brush teeth, etc.

### 2 TALK ABOUT DEATH IN MECHANICAL TERMS

Young children, in particular, are very mechanical in their processing. Think about their toys. They learn that a cube won't fit into the circle-shaped hole. They learn to piece puzzles together. So, provide a similar context when talking about death.

a. Tell the child to put their hand on their heart.

b. Ask them what they feel.

*(Thump, thump, thump of the heart)*

# 5

## TIPS FOR TEACHING KIDS ABOUT DEATH

- c. Ask them to take a deep breath, and then another.
- d. Tell them that the heart and lungs are teammates. They work with other organs like our brain where we think, and our belly that we feed (provide other organ descriptors as needed).
- e. When one of these organs stops working properly or breaks then the organs are no longer able to work together.
- f. Every organ is important and we need all of them to work in order to stay alive.  
*Example: Mommy's heart stopped working because she had something called a heart attack. Because mommy's heart no longer works none of her others organs can do their job. So, she died.*

### 3 LOOK TO THE CYCLE OF LIFE IN NATURE

Nature is an easy and accessible tool for teaching children about death. Depending on their age, they have seen flowers bloom, trees grow and shed their leaves, the change of seasons, and ants get squashed. While using nature to discuss death doesn't effectively address the emotional counterpart of the death of a loved one, it is a strong foundation for helping a child understand that living things die.

### 4 UTILIZE LIFE EVENTS

Life is fertile with opportunities to talk about, normalize, and explore death. When a gold fish dies, use it as a learning opportunity. The same is true for any pet. When children hear about death in the news of a celebrity or a public tragedy, don't sweep it under the rug and pretend like it didn't happen. Death and grief are a part of life. If we help children understand and process this fundamental fact it won't ruin their childhood, make them lose their innocence, or cause damage. Instead, it gives provides opportunity to learn, explore, discover, ask, and develop coping skills before someone they know dies. Talking about the dead deer on the side of the road equips a child to be healthier, better informed, and better prepared.

### 5 ASK WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW

Children are exposed to death all the time. Disney loves to produce movies with orphans like Cinderella, The Lion King, The Little Mermaid, Bambi, and others. Many superheroes lost a parent, including Spiderman, Batman, and many more. The concept of dead people is not new to children. Unfortunately, adults seldom talk about it or engage it in meaningful or productive way with kids. Ask a child what they think about death, what they know, and what they've heard. And then be prepared to answer honestly without clichés or abstract metaphors. Concrete and honest facts are best for children.



# HOW TO

# HOW TO TELL A CHILD SOMEONE DIED

For many, it can be an incredible burden to be the one to tell a child that someone important to them has died. Most adults struggle with talking about death, so when it comes time to talk about death with a child we can often feel helpless. What should I say? What is appropriate and inappropriate? Even though it is hard to share bad news, there are simple ways to start the conversation.

Telling a child someone has died starts with a commitment to honesty. Honesty is important. In order to be honest, enter the conversation without expectations about how they will react to the news. Some kids may respond with fear, while others may seem indifferent. There are no “right and wrong,” or “good and bad” reactions.

How you tell a child that someone died depends on context, nature of the relationship, and timing. For example, if a teacher or student died over the weekend, it will be helpful to have a conversation about the death in advance of school on Monday. News of this nature spreads incredibly quickly, and it is important that the child knows the truth before classmates and others in the community begin sharing their own story and interpretation of the death.

It is important to remember that there will be aspects of this that you can and cannot control in these situations. You can play an important role in how children hear about and come to understand the death. We can best support our children by having an open dialogue that helps build understanding and an opportunity to express themselves.

## **BELOW IS A SCRIPT YOU MIGHT TRY IF A TEACHER OR ADULT IN THEIR LIFE DIES:**

1. Adult: So, Alexis, have you heard about what happened with Mrs. Scott?

Don't assume Alexis doesn't already know. She may have picked it up already from a friend on social media etc.

2. Adult: I just learned that Mrs. Scott died.

WAIT to see how the child responds.

3. Adult: I think a lot of your friends and teachers will be talking about it this week in school. I would like us to talk about it too.

Allow yourself to be spontaneous with the conversation. Here are some things you should know about typical reactions:

- Each child responds differently.
- Children may have an increased sense of fear for their safety and yours.
- Children may be afraid to return to school.
- Children process information in fragments. They may take it in and then quickly move onto something else.
- Children may just want to be with their friends.
- Children usually have lots of questions. It will be important to answer them at an age-appropriate level.

# HOW TO

## HOW TO TELL A CHILD SOMEONE DIED

4. Adult: This is really [insert emotion such as sad, disappointing, etc.].

Wait to see if the child has ideas of her own.

5. Adult: Assure the child that they can talk openly about the death and their feelings with you. Identify other people they can also talk with at school or in their life. Communicate your love and allow them to explore their reactions. Often, reassurance and love are the most meaningful things we can do for our children.

### **HERE ARE THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN TELLING A CHILD THAT A PARENT, SIBLING, OR LOVED ONE DIED:**

**HONESTY** – Kids need to know the truth. Don't lie or distort the facts. However, you don't have to provide all the facts at once. Start with a few facts and give more as they ask for them so you don't overwhelm with information.

**SAFETY** – Kids need to know that their needs are going to be met and that you will be there for them.

**DON'T MAKE FALSE PROMISES** – You can't promise that you will not die. Instead, ensure their safety.

**PREPARATION** – Don't arrive at a funeral without telling a child what they'll see and what to expect. Similarly, prepare a child for what they might see, feel, or hear in the coming days.

**INCLUSION** – Do not exclude children. Empower them to make decisions about their participation in rituals and give opportunities for them to feel like they can contribute.

**GIVE SPACE** – A child may need to go outside and play, be by herself, or go be with friends.

**NO EXPECTATIONS** – A child may seem indifferent or provide another surprising response. That's okay. It's just how some kids digest difficult information, especially if they don't understand the finality or enormity of what has happened.

**STAY AWAY FROM CLICHÉS AND ABSTRACT IDEAS** – While there is, of course, a place for religion in this process, employing it here is not the place for it. Religious ideas are often abstract and confusing to a child and don't ultimately help them understand what "death" means. If you say, "Mommy has gone to heaven" a child will likely be confused and wonder when she will come back, how to get to heaven to see Mommy, or think God is selfish for taking Mommy away.

This can be a very overwhelming time. It's not about getting it perfect, but being informed and staying consistently honest. There is time to clarify and try again if the first time didn't go as you had hoped. There are many conversations ahead...

# 10

# TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH GRIEVING KIDS

## 1 LISTEN, TRULY LISTEN

Talking is not always helpful; listening is. Silence can invite more sharing. Advice or comments are not always necessary; often the child just needs to be heard. Actively listen by repeating what you hear them say to ensure you are understanding them correctly by using phrases like "I hear you" and "Tell me more." Let them know you heard them, for example, "Wow, it sounds like you had a really tough day at school."

## 2 BE PRESENT

Life is busy and distracting, so being present is harder than it sounds. When your children are talking, especially about their concerns, pay attention and be present with your eyes, ears, and your full self. A child once said, "I want my mom's undivided attention, you know, not thinking about 50 other things at once." Try to stay tuned in to them.

## 3 POSE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

To encourage more sharing, avoid asking questions that have yes, no, or other single word answers. For example, a good alternative to "How was your day?" is "Tell me one good thing that happened today." Give them time to respond. While who, what, when, and where questions show your interest in your child, try not to be intrusive or take over the conversation. Instead, stay gently curious, such as "What is that like for you?" or "What else happened?"

## 4 FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Instead of asking your children specific questions that you want answered, let them take the lead in the conversation. Pick up on what they are saying and engage with them in what they want to talk about. Name and validate the child's feelings by reflecting back the feeling they are expressing, such as "Sounds like you felt really lonely." We can't fix or take away their pain, but we can validate their painful feelings. And if they don't want to talk, that's okay too.

## 5 BE AUTHENTIC

It's okay to show and to respond to your child with real emotion. Model for them by sharing how you are feeling, for example, "I feel really sad too, especially when I hear that song." Such expressions can be helpful in showing children that strong emotions can co-exist with the ability to keep on living. Genuine responses usually make children want to share more.

## 6 LISTEN AND TALK DURING THE "IN-BETWEEN" TIMES

Sometimes great conversations happen during the "in-betweens" of life, like driving, walking, doing an activity together, or at bed time because of the parallel position; the parent and child aren't looking each other right in the eye. Talking side-by-side with your child can create a strong connection.

# 10

# TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH GRIEVING KIDS

## 7 HONESTY MATTERS

Children are better at handling the truth of a situation than we might think. When we tell children the truth in simple, developmentally appropriate language, we build trust and model for them that they too can be honest with us. Being honest also can mean sharing that you do not have all of the answers, and that is okay. If we want children to develop good coping skills, it starts with knowing the truth about a situation.

## 8 TAKE TIME TO SHARE

Busy families often lack the time to sit and talk with each other, so create conversation times and rituals, which might include an activity like playing a board game. By having a set time that works for you - either daily, weekly, or monthly - it creates a culture and a safe time for sharing. Adults can initiate sharing too by talking about themselves, rather than just questioning. This often triggers ideas for children to share about themselves.

## 9 MAKE CONVERSATIONS PLACES OF COMFORT

When your children talk with you, you want them to feel heard, and perhaps relieved, inspired, or recharged, rather than guilty or a source of disappointment to you. Ask what they may want or need from you, such as advice, help solving a problem, or simply listening. Offer your ear as well as words of encouragement and soften strong reactions like anger or frustration.

## 10 BE SPONTANEOUS!

Do the unexpected and mix things up, like doing homework in the park or watching a movie together on a school night. These unexpected shared opportunities can generate fun, a sense of connection that is the basis for more talking and sharing, and create new memories.

### REMEMBER...

Communication is difficult, and no one is perfect. These 10 tips are just suggestions, not absolute "must dos." Find what works for your child, for you, and for your routines. And if a child chooses not to talk, simply respect that and let them know that you are always available to them.



# GRIEF IN DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

AGES	LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING	REACTIVE BEHAVIORS	NEEDS
2 AND UNDER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can sense that something is different at home.</li> <li>• Does not yet understand what death is.</li> <li>• Probably won't remember the person who died.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fussiness</li> <li>• Clinging to adults</li> <li>• Regressive behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-verbal care (such as hugs and rocking)</li> <li>• Stable routine</li> </ul>
2 – 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sees death as temporary – believes person will return. Don't fear death, but fear separation.</li> <li>• Usually can't comprehend the concepts of heaven, afterlife or soul.</li> <li>• Feels sadness, but often periods of grief are interspersed with normal playing behavior.</li> <li>• Substitutes attachment from the deceased person to another person.</li> <li>• May not remember the person who died.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regression (bed wetting, thumb sucking)</li> <li>• Fear of separation</li> <li>• Nightmares</li> <li>• Aggression</li> <li>• Non-compliance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable daily routine</li> <li>• Structure</li> <li>• Honesty, use the words "dead" and "died"</li> <li>• Answer to questions honestly but simply</li> <li>• Love</li> <li>• Reassurance</li> <li>• To be heard, so listen</li> </ul>
6 – 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begins to understand that death is permanent.</li> <li>• Develops fear of death and of others dying.</li> <li>• May feel guilt and blame self for death; see it as punishment for bad behavior.</li> <li>• Magical thinking; may see self as cause of death.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grief ebbs and flows</li> <li>• Compulsive care giving</li> <li>• Aggression</li> <li>• Possessiveness (e.g. of remaining parent)</li> <li>• Regression</li> <li>• Somatic complaints</li> <li>• School phobia</li> <li>• Exaggerated fears</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ways to express their feelings (art, writing, etc.)</li> <li>• Concrete answers to questions</li> <li>• Validation of feelings</li> <li>• Love</li> <li>• Reassurance that they are not to blame</li> <li>• To be heard, so listen</li> </ul>
10 – 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a realistic view of death and its permanence.</li> <li>• Asks specific questions about death, the body, etc.</li> <li>• Interested in the gory details.</li> <li>• Concerned with practical questions. (Who will take care of me? How will my family's life style change?)</li> <li>• Identifies strongly with deceased.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upset by the disruption in their lives</li> <li>• Blame others for the loss</li> <li>• Separation anxiety, some denial and/or guilt</li> <li>• Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>• Decline in school performance</li> <li>• Want to be "fixers"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permission and outlets to express feelings, including anger, relief, sadness, etc.</li> <li>• Validation of feelings</li> <li>• Offers of support and assistance and to know who can help them to be heard, so listen, listen, and listen</li> </ul>
13 – 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizes that life is fragile; death is inevitable and irreversible.</li> <li>• May worry about own death.</li> <li>• Often tries not to think or talk about the death.</li> <li>• Sometimes hides feelings so as not to look different from peers.</li> <li>• Ponders and questions religious and philosophical beliefs.</li> <li>• Often angry at the deceased or at people involved in the death (e.g. doctors).</li> <li>• Fears the future.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggression, anger</li> <li>• Possessiveness</li> <li>• Somatic complaints</li> <li>• Phobias</li> <li>• Increased risk taking</li> <li>• Promiscuity</li> <li>• Increased drug/alcohol use</li> <li>• Defiance</li> <li>• Delinquent acts</li> <li>• Suicidal ideation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A trusted adult or peer for support</li> <li>• Parental openness in sharing feelings</li> <li>• Help in learning to manage feelings</li> <li>• Continued emotional support</li> <li>• Presence of parents</li> <li>• Encouragement of efforts toward independence</li> </ul>

# ANTICIPATING QUESTIONS (REFLECTIONS)

## HOW DO I TELL MY CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

See tip sheet

## IS MY CHILD GOING TO BE TRAUMATIZED?

Death is a normal part of the human experience. Trauma is a self-perceived threat so depending on how the death happened, a child may have a traumatic response. This is not easily assessed in the early days because many trauma responses look like acute grief. If the family has concerns, encourage them to check-in with a mental health professional who has grief experience and to consult online resources (unfortunately, some people like to pathologize grief and label it as traumatic when it is not. It is important that a family finds a professional that is the right fit).

## SHOULD MY CHILD ATTEND THE FUNERAL?

Yes, yes, yes. The only exception is if a child decides s/he does not want to but that decision needs to be well-informed. A well-informed child will have received information about what is going to happen without bias. Few children and youth will opt out if given the information they need to make the decision.

## WHAT DO I DO WITH THE KIDS DURING THE WAKE AND FUNERAL?

This is where you share your engagement plan and discuss the importance of inclusion and empowerment. And, if a parent is unsure how their child will do, a back up plan is always good. Encourage them to have a point person who can check in on the kids and even take them home if they've had enough.

## HOW DO I EXPLAIN DEATH TO MY CHILD?

See tip sheet

## MY IN-LAWS DON'T THINK THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH SHOULD PARTICIPATE. WHAT DO I DO?


Acknowledge that family dynamics are complicated. The Youth & Funerals video is designed to help adults navigate family dynamics. An unbiased, professional, and experienced third party is helping you advocate for the children and youth.

## MY FRIENDS WANT TO BRING THEIR CHILDREN AND YOUTH. WHAT DO I TELL THEM?

It is appropriate for funerals to be private. However, who is excluded should not be decided upon based on age or height. Rather, that decision should only pertain to the nature of the relationship with the person who died.

## I DON'T THINK MY CHILD CAN HANDLE THIS. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

This is a question that is likely rooted in fear. You have all the resources you need to show this adult otherwise. But first, spend the time trying to understand the fear and concerns. What does this parent think is the worst thing that will happen? And from there, begin to introduce your wisdom.



“ Being at my dad’s funeral was important to me, because my dad was important to me.



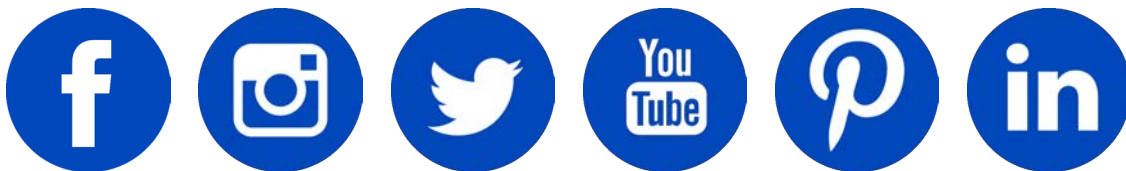
Love  
Never  
Dies





# GOOD GRIEF™

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