

when a child is grieving

a gentle guide for helping children navigate the loss of someone they love

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

you are not alone in this. if you are reading this, you are likely caring for a child who is carrying a loss, and carrying one of your own at the same time. that is an enormous thing to hold. this guide was written to sit beside you in it.

the words that follow come from caitlin kennedy, a play therapist and registered counsellor, who works with grieving children and the families who love them. her guidance is gentle, practical, and grounded in how children actually move through loss, not how we sometimes expect them to.

there is no need to read it all at once. come to the parts you need, when you need them. return as your child grows and their grief takes new shapes. to remember is to keep loving.

CHILDREN GRIEVE THROUGH PLAY

children often move in and out of grief. they may cry one moment and play happily the next. this is not avoidance; it is how children naturally regulate overwhelming feelings. play gives children a safe way to approach difficult emotions in manageable pieces.

play therapist insight:

play is a child's language.

toys can become a child's words.

repetitive play themes may be their way of making sense of loss or change.

my memory treasure box

invite children to decorate a box and fill it with photos, drawings, notes, and small objects that remind them of the person, for example a necklace, toys, and so on.

benefits: encourages continuing bonds, gives children a sense of control, creates a tangible connection.

sand tray play

telling the story without words. using miniatures, invite children to create their family before the loss, their family now, what they wish could happen, and a safe place.

parents don't need to interpret. simply witnessing is powerful. modern grief work recognises that healthy grieving does not mean "letting go."

FIRST, TAKE A BREATH

when your child is grieving, it's natural to feel pressure to say the "right" thing. you may worry about making things worse, or about not having the answers.

the truth is, your child doesn't need you to fix their grief; they just need you to be present with it.

acknowledge how they are feeling. rather than rushing to reassure or distract your child, begin by acknowledging what they might be experiencing.

you might say:

“this is really hard.”

“i can see you’re feeling sad.”

“it’s okay to miss them.”

“i wonder if you’re feeling confused.”

“i’m here with you.”

“you don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. we can just sit together.”

sometimes children won’t have words for their feelings. they may communicate through tears, anger, silence, or play. rather than trying to change or fix these feelings, let them know they are accepted.

please know this: your presence matters more than perfect words. parents often worry about saying the wrong thing. the truth is, children rarely remember the exact words we use. they remember how safe, loved, and supported they felt. you don’t need to have all the answers. simply being willing to listen, acknowledge their feelings, and stay alongside them is one of the greatest gifts you can offer.

for today, let this be enough: children do not move through grief by forgetting. they move through grief by remembering with support.

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S GRIEF

children experience grief differently from adults. while adults often express grief through words, children are more likely to express it through their behaviour, play, creativity, and body. as a play therapist, one of the most important things i help parents understand is that children often show us their grief long before they can tell us about it.

grief is not a straight line

children don't usually grieve in one continuous process. they naturally move in and out of grief, playing happily one moment and becoming tearful the next.

this isn't because they've forgotten the person who died, or because they aren't grieving enough. their play gives them a break from overwhelming emotions and allows them to process loss in manageable pieces.

children often "dip in and out" of grief. this is a healthy and protective way of coping.

every child grieves differently

there is no "right" way to grieve. some children cry openly, while others become quieter, more active, clingier, or even seem unaffected. siblings who experience the same loss may respond in completely different ways.

try to avoid comparing your child's grief to anyone else's. instead, remain curious about what their behaviour might be communicating.

the words we use matter

children can become confused by phrases such as "we lost grandma," "he's sleeping," "she's gone away," or "god took him."

clearer and kinder: “grandma died.” “her body stopped working.” “when someone dies, they do not breathe, eat, or feel pain anymore.” simple, truthful language helps children feel safe.

DIFFERENT AGES, DIFFERENT NEEDS

young children, around 3 to 5 years

young children may not fully understand that death is permanent, and ask repeatedly, “when are they coming back?” they move quickly between sadness and play, ask the same questions many times, and worry that they or someone else they love might also die. they may believe their thoughts, words, or actions somehow caused the death (“was it because i was naughty?”). grief may show as clinginess, tantrums, toileting accidents, sleep difficulties, or separation anxiety, and often comes through play, drawing, storytelling, or pretend games rather than talking.

helpful responses: use simple, honest language and avoid euphemisms like “gone to sleep” or “passed away.” answer questions patiently, even if they ask the same ones many times. offer reassurance: “nothing you said or did caused this to happen.” maintain familiar routines. follow your child’s lead, whether they want to play or talk. name and validate emotions: “it’s okay to feel sad, angry, confused, or even happy sometimes.” offer comfort through closeness, cuddles, reading together, or sitting quietly with them.

children this age often process grief through play rather than conversation. you may notice your child acting out hospitals, funerals, families, or rescue stories with toys. this isn’t something to discourage, it’s often how young children begin to understand experiences that feel too big for words. rather than asking “why are you playing that?” try becoming a gentle observer. sit alongside them, describe what you notice (“your teddy looks very sad”), and allow the play to unfold naturally. your calm presence tells your child that all feelings are welcome and that they don’t have to face them alone.

school-age children, around 6 to 9 years

children this age begin to understand that death is permanent, but still have many questions about how and why it happened. they may worry about who will care for them, or whether someone else they love might die. they can feel sadness, anger, guilt, worry, or confusion, sometimes all in the same day, find it difficult to concentrate at school, become more irritable or withdrawn, hide their feelings so as not to seem different from peers, and revisit the loss at different times as their understanding grows.

helpful responses: encourage questions and answer them honestly, using age-appropriate language. let your child know that all feelings are welcome, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. reassure them that they are safe, loved, and cared for. create opportunities to talk, but don’t pressure them if they aren’t ready. maintain routines while allowing flexibility for difficult days. invite them to express themselves through drawing, writing, storytelling, music, or play. keep remembering the person who died through stories, photographs, and family traditions.

young children don’t need long explanations. they need short, truthful answers, repeated with patience, and a caring adult who is willing to revisit the conversation as often as needed.

children aged 6 to 9 are often beginning to understand that death is permanent, but they may still struggle to put their thoughts and feelings into words. creative activities can provide a safe bridge between their inner world and their ability to communicate. drawing pictures, making memory books, writing letters to the person who died, storytelling, and imaginative play all allow children to explore their grief at a pace that feels manageable. rather than focusing on creating the “right” picture or story, be curious about what your child chooses to share. sometimes sitting alongside them quietly is more supportive than asking lots of questions.

pre-teens, around 10 to 12 years

pre-teens may have a more mature understanding that death is permanent and affects everyone. they ask deeper questions about life, death, fairness, or what happens after someone dies, and experience a wide range of emotions including sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, relief, or even numbness. they may try to hide their feelings or “be strong” to protect family members, worry about the future or about losing other people they love, and move between wanting independence and needing extra comfort.

helpful responses: invite open conversations without forcing them to talk before they’re ready. let them know there is no expectation to “be strong” or look after everyone else’s feelings. validate all emotions, even those that seem confusing or conflicting. encourage healthy ways of expressing grief, through talking, journaling, art, music, or movement. include them in family conversations and rituals where appropriate. continue reassuring them that they are loved, supported, and not alone. respect their need for privacy while gently checking in.

grief doesn’t always look like tears. at this age, it may appear as frustration, difficulty concentrating, physical complaints, or a sudden need for reassurance. try to look beneath the behaviour and ask yourself, “what feeling might my child be communicating?” responding with curiosity and compassion helps children feel seen, understood, and supported.

children aged 10 to 12 are developing the ability to reflect on their thoughts and emotions, but this doesn’t mean they will always express them openly. many children this age worry about burdening others, or believe they need to appear “grown up.” as adults, we can gently remind them that grief doesn’t have an age limit or a timeline. some children may prefer talking, while others communicate best through creative outlets, physical activity, music, writing, or quiet moments. open questions give children choice and communicate that you are available whenever they are ready.

teenagers

this is a favourite age group to write about, because there are so many misconceptions. people often assume teenagers grieve like adults, but they don't. from a developmental and play therapy perspective, they're navigating grief alongside identity formation, peer relationships, increasing independence, and big emotional changes. they may look like adults, but they still need emotionally attuned adults around them, and often want both independence and connection at the same time.

teenagers may understand the permanence of death but struggle to make sense of its impact on their own life and future. they can experience intense emotions that change quickly, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, or numbness. they may withdraw from family while seeking comfort from friends, want privacy and independence while still needing reassurance, throw themselves into school, sport, work, or social activities as a way of coping, question their beliefs or sense of identity, and appear "fine" on the outside while carrying significant grief internally.

instead of asking "how are you feeling?", which can feel overwhelming, you might try:

"what's been on your mind lately?"

"what's been the hardest part this week?"

"is there anything you wish other people understood about how you're feeling?"

"would you rather talk, draw, go for a walk, or just spend some time together?"

helpful responses: respect their need for space while reminding them that you're available whenever they want to talk. listen without rushing to solve problems or offer advice. validate their feelings without judging or comparing their grief to anyone else's. encourage healthy coping strategies, spending time with friends, exercising, journaling, creating art, or talking to a trusted adult. keep communication open by checking in regularly, even if conversations are brief. continue to include them in family rituals, memories, and decisions if they wish. be patient if they express grief through anger, silence, or frustration rather than tears.

teenagers often communicate their grief indirectly. while younger children use toys

and imaginative play, teenagers may express themselves through music, writing, art, photography, movement, gaming, or time spent with trusted friends. silence doesn't necessarily mean a teenager isn't grieving; some need time to process internally before sharing. rather than pushing for conversations, focus on creating opportunities for connection. sometimes the most meaningful discussions happen while driving, walking the dog, cooking together, or sitting side by side, when eye contact isn't expected. your teenager may say "i'm fine" even when they're hurting. continue showing up with quiet consistency, patience, and compassion. knowing that a trusted adult is present, available, and willing to listen can be one of the greatest protective factors during grief.

PLAY THERAPY INSPIRED WAYS TO SUPPORT GRIEVING CHILDREN

draw your feelings

invite your child to draw what grief looks like, a favourite memory, a safe place, or what their heart feels like today. rather than asking "what is this?" try saying "tell me about your picture." this allows children to share as much, or as little, as they choose.

share stories

read books about grief together, or make up stories using imaginary characters. sometimes children find it easier to talk about how "the little bear" or "the brave fox" feels before talking about themselves. stories create emotional distance, making difficult feelings feel safer to explore.

feeling weather

ask, "if your feelings were weather today, what would they be?" sunny? stormy? foggy? partly cloudy? this gives children a language for emotions.

feelings check-in

as a gentle alternative to the weather question above, instead of asking “how are you?” try creative check-ins like:

“what colour matches your feelings today?”

“what weather is inside your heart?”

“if your feelings were an animal, what would they be?”

these playful prompts help children express emotions without needing sophisticated emotional vocabulary.

CREATIVE WAYS CHILDREN CAN REMEMBER SOMEONE THEY LOVE

invite your child to light a candle on special days, write letters, make a scrapbook, cook a favourite meal or recipe, keep a special object nearby, talk to the person during difficult moments, visit a meaningful place, tell favourite stories, or create a memory garden.

helping children remember the person who died supports a healthy, ongoing bond, rather than encouraging them to “move on.”

wherever your child is in their grief, may you remember this: one of the greatest gifts we can offer a grieving child is permission, permission to play, laugh, cry, ask questions, remember, and revisit their grief as they grow.

children don't process grief in one conversation or one activity. they return to it over time, often through play, creativity, and everyday moments. rather than trying to fix their sadness, our role is to walk alongside them with curiosity, compassion, and consistency. play doesn't distract children from grief, it is often how they move through it.

grief changes shape, but love stays.

this guide is part of the home for grief, a project of the erin foundation, a space created to help people carry loss with a little more gentleness, and a little less alone-ness.

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