



**The
Community Hospice
Grief Center**

**Community Hospice
of Albany County**
445 New Karner Road
Albany, NY 12205
Phone: 518-724-0200
Fax: 518-724-0299

**Community Hospice
of Amsterdam**
246 Manny Corners Rd.
Amsterdam, NY 12010
Phone: 518-843-5412
Fax: 518-843-9057

**Community Hospice
of Columbia/Greene**
47 Liberty Street
Catskill, NY 12414
Phone: 518-943-5402
Fax: 518-943-0776
26 Park Row
Chatham, NY 12037
Phone: 518-392-0687
Fax: 518-392-0689

**Community Hospice
of Rensselaer County**
295 Valley View Blvd.
Rensselaer, NY 12144
Phone: 518-285-8100
Fax: 518-285-8145

**Community Hospice
of Saratoga County**
179 Lawrence Street
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
Phone: 518-581-0800
Fax: 518-581-9460

**Community Hospice
of Schenectady County**
1411 Union Street
Schenectady, NY 12308
Phone: 518-377-8846
Fax: 518-377-8868



Answering Children's Questions About Death

Many children have questions about death and dying. Caring adults can help by making it acceptable to talk about these difficult issues, and by answering children's questions carefully and honestly. This discussion may arise naturally when the subject comes up in books, television shows, and movies, or it may be related to a loss in the child's life.

Children's understanding of death changes a great deal as they grow through childhood. Finding out what a child already thinks about death will make it possible to correct any misunderstandings. Simply asking what the child believes before answering any questions can make the discussion much more productive.

Many people are concerned that they will say the wrong thing. The best guide is to keep answers simple, honest, and aimed at the child's own age and developmental level. However, here are some general ideas for answering common questions.

What is death?

Death is when a body completely stops working. It becomes broken in a way that can not be fixed. The body no longer sees, feels, hears, or thinks. The force that brings a body to life is gone, like a toy with no more batteries. Death is nothing at all like sleeping. When a body is sleeping, it is resting and preparing for another day. When a body dies, it will never be alive again.

Usually when people are sick or hurt, doctors can help them get better. People go to hospitals to get healthy if they are very sick. Sometimes, though, people are too sick for doctors to heal. Then doctors and nurses try to help the dying person by keeping him or her from hurting while he or she dies.

Why do people die?

All living things die. People can die when their bodies become too sick to be healed, when they have an accident that injures their body in a way that doctors can't fix, or when they get very old and their body wears out. All life on earth is part of a continuing cycle. Every life begins, grows, and ends. Usually people live long and healthy lives, dying when they become very old and their body parts can no longer work correctly. Sometimes people do die young. It does not happen often. It is usually very sad for the people who loved them. But even someone who died very young could have had a very special and important life while they are alive.

People do not die because they are good or bad. Being angry at someone does not make them die. Even wishing someone would die doesn't make it happen.

Dying happens because the body can't work any more. It is not a punishment. Death sometimes doesn't seem fair to those people who are left grieving. It hurts not to be able to see someone we love, not to be able to be with them and share time. Remembering the special times shared with that person and what their life meant to you can help bring meaning to the loss. It can help you to find a way to keep the person in your heart and keep loving.

Does dying hurt?

Usually death itself is not painful. When people die from an illness, doctors try to help them by giving them medicine to ease their pain. When people die from old age, their dying is usually very peaceful. Often, when people die in accidents they die too quickly to feel much pain. No matter how someone dies, once he or she is dead the body can no longer feel anything at all.

Where do dead people go?

The body of the dead person must be taken care of because it will change after life has left it. Sometimes people choose to bury the body. When a body is buried it is put deep in the ground. Usually a stone or marker is put at the grave to show whose body is buried there. This gives the family and friends of the person who died a place to visit to remember the loved one. Sometimes the body is cremated. This is a special process that turns the body to ashes which are sometimes kept and sometimes released into nature. In either case, the person who died no longer needs the body or feels anything that happens to it.

The part of us that feels and thinks is no longer in the body when the body dies. Many people believe that this part of us, our spirit, continues on after the body dies. Different people believe different things about where our spirits go after we die. No one knows for sure; it is a mystery. Talking to family members and others about their beliefs can help each person decide for themselves what happens to our spirits.

What is grief?

Grief (or grieving) is a word that describes the thoughts and feelings people go through when someone they care about has died. Grief is the heart and mind's way of getting used to the loss of that person. It includes feelings such as sadness and anger. It can also include feelings of relief or happiness. These feelings may seem stuck in our bodies, giving us stomach aches, head aches, or other pains. Grief is also the thoughts we have about the person who has died and our missing them.

What can I do with my feelings while I am grieving?

Going to a funeral brings you together with other people who are grieving your special person who died. Funerals are ceremonies that help people think about and celebrate the life of the deceased. It may also help to talk about the person who has died, to write letters full of the things you wished you had said to them, or to draw pictures about your feelings. Hitting your pillow, pounding on clay, running, or doing other physical activities may help your feelings not seem so stuck in your body. It is okay to cry! It is natural to be upset and to feel angry. It is important not to do anything that will harm yourself or anyone else. Sometimes, it may help to be with other children who have had a loss or to talk to a counselor. Most of all, remember that feelings of grief will change over time. You can not make them go away completely. They are part of loving the person who has died.



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How and When Should Children Attend Funerals?

Funerals are a time we gather to honor a person's life and to mark his or her passing. Attending a funeral helps people experience their loss with community support, and begin the transition to living without a loved one. Even though it may be difficult and painful, this participation helps grieving people, whether adults or children.

Each child is unique, with individual worries and abilities to handle social interactions. Therefore, while encouraging a child to attend a funeral, give a genuine choice about attending. It may be appropriate to allow for some options, such as attending a private family time at the funeral home before the service begins.

Here are some things to keep in mind when talking to children about funerals:

- Give children specific information about what they will see at the funeral. Tell them where the funeral will take place, what the room will look like, who will be coming, how long the service is likely to take, etc.
- Let children know that people attending the funeral will show many different emotions and may express them intensely. People may be upset, and it is good for people to express these feelings. Also, let the child know that people may smile, laugh and enjoy remembering good and funny things about the loved one who died.
- Let children know that funerals are important. They are a place for people to come together in their sadness over a loss. They also honor the life of the person who died and affirm that life goes on.
- Funeral homes will usually accommodate allowing children to visit before the funeral with only a few close caring adults. This may allow the children to feel more comfortable and give them a chance to talk more freely and ask questions.
- Try to provide for the child to have a close person to be available just to them at all times during the funeral process. This person needs to be a caring presence, able to focus on the child.
- Recognize that children often experience short bursts of emotion. They are impacted by loss, but outward signs of their grief will come and go. Allow for the full range of emotions in children, including happiness, playfulness, sadness, and anger.
- Give the children a choice about whether to view the body. Children often have no innate fear about the body, and seeing the body provides a chance to say goodbye and makes the loss more real.
- Listen to what children say and watch what they do. It is important to let children express what losing their loved one is like for them.
- Provide the child with life affirming messages. Even though loss is painful, life continues.

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Navigating Children's Grief: How to Help Following a Death

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth–2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No understanding of death • Child does not have words for feelings • Aware of the absence of loved one • Notices changes in routine • Notices changes in family emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longing • Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one • Fears of being abandoned • Anxiety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying • Sickliness • Indigestion • Thrashing • Rocking • Throwing • Sucking, biting • Sleeplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance • Maintain routines • Meet immediate physical needs • Include the child in the mourning process when possible • Be gentle & patient
3-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No understanding of permanence of death • To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip • May wonder what deceased is doing • Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible • May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies • Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear • Sadness • Insecurity • Confusion • Anger • Irritable • Agitated • Worried • Guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regressive behaviors • Repetitive questions • Withdrawn • Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings • Interested in dead things • Acts as if death never happened • Intense dreams • Physical complaints • Crying • Fighting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow the child to regress • Give physical contact • Encourage children to play & have fun • Allow safe ways to express feeling • Give simple & truthful answers to questions • Maintain structure and routines • Answer repetitive questions • Let the child cry • Talk (reflective listening) • Include child in family rituals & mourning
6-9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands that death is final • Interested in the biology of death • Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay • His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death • Death is punishment • Forming spiritual concepts • Who will care for me if my caregiver dies • Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sad • Anger • Lonely • Withdrawn • Worried • Anxious • Irritable • Confusion • Guilty • Fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regressive behaviors • Specific questioning – looking for details • Acts as if the death never happened • Hides feelings • Withdrawal • Nightmares / sleep disturbances • Concentration difficulties • Declining or greatly improved grades • Aggressive acting out • Protective of surviving loved ones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow need to regress • Give physical contact • Have intentional times together • Answer questions truthfully • Watch for confusion • Allow expression of feelings through verbal & physical outlets • Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports • Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning • Find peer support for the child • Work with school to tailor workload

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Behaviors	How to Help
9-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the finality of death • Denial • His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death • Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) • High death awareness (death may happen again) • What if my caregiver dies? • Formulating spiritual concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes • Shock • Sad • Anger • Confused • Lonely • Vulnerable • Fear • Worried • Guilty • Isolated • Abandoned • Anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regressive behavior & fluctuating moods • Hides feelings • Acts like death never happened • Aggressive acting out • Withdrawal • Nightmares & sleep disturbances • Concentration difficulties • Changes in grades • Talks about physical aspects of illness or death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort • Expect & accept mood swings • Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. • Find peer support groups • Be available to listen and talk • Answer questions truthfully • Offer physical contact • Give choices about involvement in death & mourning
12 years and up (teenagers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the finality & universality of death • Denial • His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death • Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) • High death awareness (death may happen again) • May sense own impending death • I need to be in control of feelings • If I show my feelings, I will be weak • Internal conflict about dependence & desiring independence • May utilize spiritual concepts to cope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief • Shock • Sad • Anger • Confused • Lonely • Vulnerable • Fear • Worried • Guilty • Isolated • Abandoned • Anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional regressive behavior • Mood swings • Hides feelings • Acts like death never happened • Acts out role confusion • Aggressive acting out • Withdrawal • Nightmares & sleep disturbances • Concentration difficulties • Changes in grades • Impulsive & high risk behavior • Changes in peer groups • Fighting, screaming, arguing • Changes in eating patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort • Expect & accept mood swings • Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm • Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. • Support relationships with understanding adults • Be available to listen and talk • Answer questions truthfully • Share your grief • Watch for high risk behavior • Find peer support groups • Offer physical contact • Allow choices about involvement in death & mourning



Grief Reactions

Because grief can be so painful, and seem overwhelming, it frightens us. We sometimes feel out of control. Many people worry: Am I grieving in the "right" way"? Are my feelings "normal"?

Check Off All Experiences You Have Felt:

Physical Sensations:

Tightness in Throat
Heaviness in Chest
Dryness of Mouth
Sense of Emptiness in Stomach
Breathlessness
Lack of energy
Weakness of muscles
Headaches

Behaviors:

Absentmindedness
Difficulty in Concentrating
Not wanting to be around people at times
Sleep Problems
Restlessness
Appetite Loss or Gain
Dreaming of loved one
Crying
Not being able to cry
Mood changes
Visiting places that remind us
Denial
Hearing or seeing the deceased
Loss of interest in social activities
Loss of interest in personal appearance
Nightmares

Feelings:

Sadness
Regrets
Anger
Fear of future
Blame
Relief
Loneliness
Helplessness
Tired
Anxiousness
Guilt

Thoughts:

Disbelief
Confusion
Hopelessness
Abandoned
Worry about future
Worry about family
Thinking what might have been
Talking to the deceased
Thinking the person is going to be there when I open the door
Can't stop thinking about person.