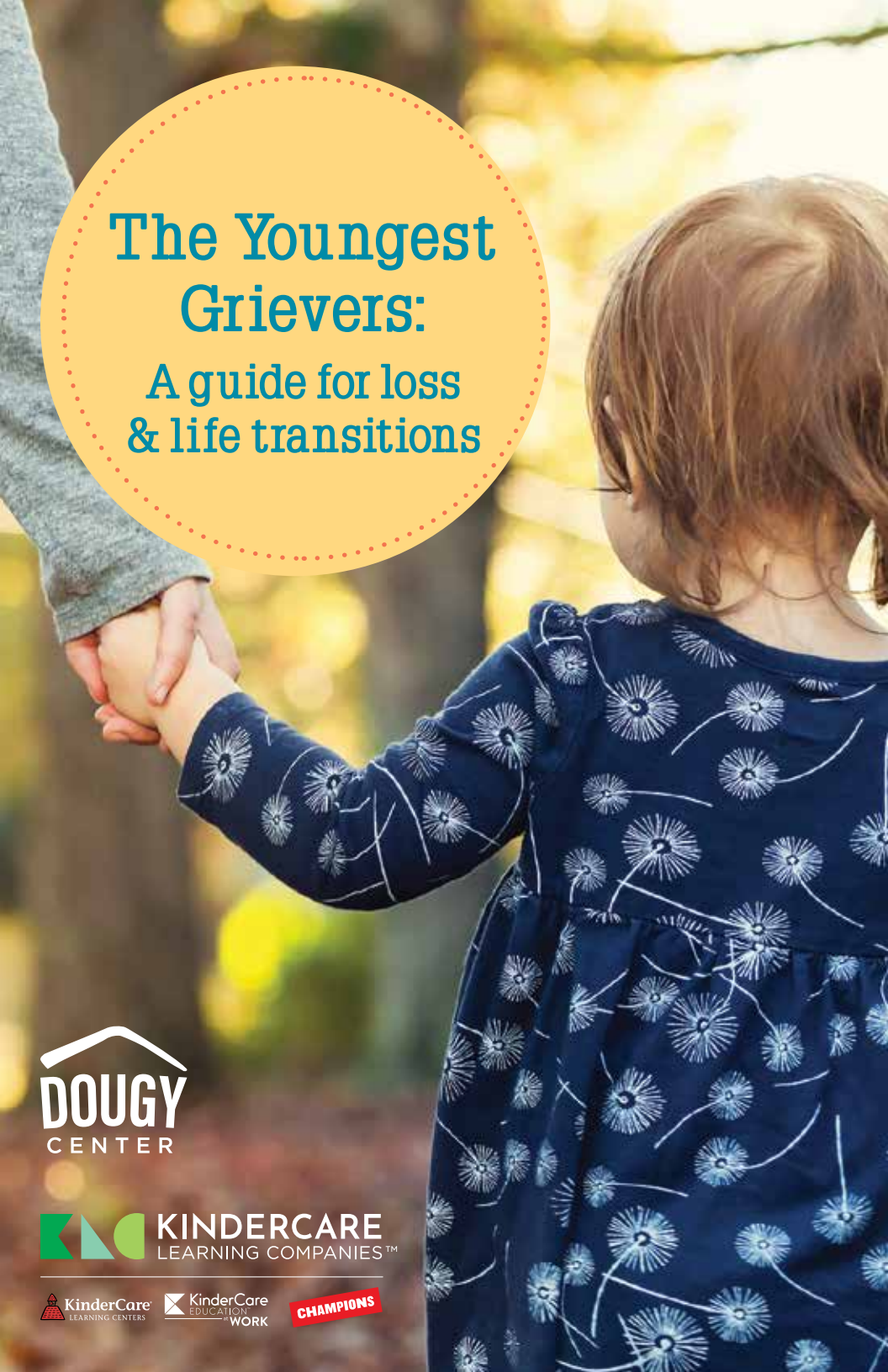

The Youngest Grievers:

A guide for loss & life transitions

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When a loss happens...

whether through the death of a family member, a divorce, family involvement in child welfare, or a move to a new neighborhood, young children can feel the effects deeply. Some may also experience the loss of a family member due to military deployment, incarceration, or adoption. For children grieving a loss, the support of a compassionate and informed adult can help them thrive, even in the midst of significant changes in their family and lives. Thank you for being that adult — we welcome you to this guide for grieving children

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Taking care of yourself is one of the most important aspects to caring for a child and yet, it's often the one most easily overlooked. Several suggestions for ways to do so are offered throughout the book and a full section on Help for the Caregiver is on page 49.

How to use this book

Whether you are a parent, teacher, family member or family friend, our goal is to offer simple, accessible information and tools you can use to thoughtfully and meaningfully care for the grieving children in your life (and yourself!). This guidebook is designed to be flexible. If time is limited, or perhaps your grief makes it hard to take in a lot of details, you may wish to flip through the pages, and try out one or two simple ideas or suggestions at a time. Or, you might like to take it slowly and read through from beginning to end, experimenting with the different possibilities one by one.

If you are grieving, just getting yourself and your child out of bed in the morning may feel like climbing a mountain. If you're a teacher, you might be thinking about all of the other children in your classroom, and the many goals you have for each day and week. In either case, thank you for your commitment to the children in your life! At The Dougy Center, we have learned that grief is unique, and what works well for one person, may not work at all for another. At KinderCare, we respond to the unique needs and interests of every child. With these thoughts in mind, we invite you to bring a sense of experimentation to exploring this book, and to give yourself permission to use it in the way that works best for you, and for the child (or children) you are here to support.

Grief and loss, in all their forms

Many experiences can bring grief and loss to a child's and family's life. Grief can be part of any major transition, including after a death, when someone in the family has an advanced serious illness, after a divorce, due to child welfare or justice system involvement, because of a big move, and so on. This guidebook is written with all types of grief in mind, and the tools and techniques were created to be of support for any child, regardless of their specific experience of loss. As you begin to explore the information and ideas, we invite you to consider how they might apply and be of help for the child in your life, even if the specific details differ from those you're seeing and experiencing.

Grief and support are not one-size-fits-all

Our community, family, individual histories, and identities inform the way we move through significant life changes, and the ways we offer support to others. These identities are central to the experience of loss, and to being in a relationship with grieving children. Race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)abilities, spiritual and religious beliefs, and so on, will all interact as we work to understand and care for the children in our lives.

While there can be many commonalities in the experience of grief and loss, every person, family, community, and culture is unique, as is the understanding and expression of that grief. In the descriptions throughout this book, there may be pieces that resonate deeply for you, while others seem to miss the mark completely. In your family, for example, it may be expected that people cry publicly to demonstrate their love of the person who has died. In other families, this would be seen as completely inappropriate. Our goal is to share as many tools and strategies as possible; strategies that have been a support for the grieving children we have worked with for over 30 years at The Dougy Center. If a story or suggestion doesn't feel like a good fit, we hope there will be many others that do "click" for you. We also encourage and invite you to tap into the wisdom of your cultural and familial background, and to use those techniques in correspondence with the ideas presented here.

Talking to children about death and grief

When a loss occurs, our first instinct as adults might be to protect children by not telling them what's happened. This urge to protect is understandable, but it is more helpful and supportive to tell children the truth, in language they can understand. Knowing the truth reduces confusion and also lets children use their limited energy and inner resources to adjust to the loss instead of trying to figure out what happened. Even babies and very young children will know that something is different when someone in their life is ill, has died, or is no longer living with them or caring for them in the same way. To help with comprehension, use clear, concrete, body-centered language. It can be hard to come up with the exact words, so we've included some examples here. Even though these discussions can be hard to have, being honest and open is an important first step in helping grieving children.

Even with lots of tips, talking to children about grief and death can be emotionally taxing, especially if you are grieving yourself. Try to pay attention to your own feelings that pop up during these conversations and make space to tend to them in whatever way feels most appropriate for you.

If someone has been diagnosed with or died from an illness, it's important to name the illness. This helps minimize children's worry that every time someone gets sick they will die. "Grandma has an illness called cancer, it is very different than the cold that you had last week." Be sure to explain if an illness is contagious or not. Many children worry that they will either catch what someone has or that they somehow passed the illness on to the person.

Here are some examples of how to talk to very young children when a loss occurs:

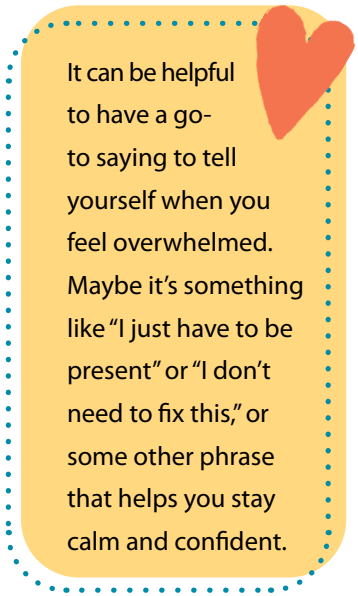
- Auntie Sophie is going to a place called prison. Grown-ups go to prison when they break a rule called a "law". She's not there because of anything you did, and this is not your fault. She won't be able to babysit you anymore, but we can write her letters.
- Shaquille has to be at the hospital because he has a sickness called leukemia. We can visit him after school. You can't catch what Shaquille has and you didn't give it to him.
- Mommy and I are not going to live in the same house anymore. We are getting something called a divorce. We still love you very much and you didn't do anything to make this happen.
- Daddy's heart stopped working and he died of something called a heart attack.
- Abuelita died of an illness called cancer. The doctors tried, but they weren't able to fix it.
- Uncle Jameson was in an accident and his body stopped working. He doesn't sleep, eat, or breathe anymore the way we do.

The ARQ - Awareness, Reflection, Questions

It can feel overwhelming to care for a grieving child. To help, remember the ARQ: Awareness, Reflection and Questions. These are three skills you can use to create an interaction that is safe, supportive, and understanding.

Awareness:

The first step in supporting a grieving child is to be aware of your own thoughts, reactions, and beliefs related to grief and loss. Take a moment to breathe and check-in with yourself. Some self-awareness check-ins include: "What is coming up for me in this interaction? Is my own grief from the past or present being activated? What do I need?" Having this self-awareness enables you to choose how to respond to the child, rather than just react. It's important to also have an awareness of the child's developmental level, their family's cultural traditions, and other events in their life that might affect their grief (anniversary of a death, change in someone's health status, family member moving in or out of the house, etc).



Reflection:

Reflecting back to a child what you hear them say, and see them do, is an effective way to communicate you are deeply listening. It also creates space for them to tell and show you more about what they are thinking, feeling, and wondering. You can reflect words, body language, energy level, and actions. Reflecting a child's question enables them to explore situations from their own perspective.

Here are some examples of reflection:

You can reflect exactly what a child says.
Child: My mommy has an owie in her head.
Teacher: Your mommy has an owie in her head.

You can reflect tone of voice and add reflective questions to encourage additional sharing.
Child, talking quietly: Daddy, I'm scared, what if I never see Grandma again?
Caregiver, using a quiet voice: You're scared, and wondering if you'll ever see Grandma again. What do you think? or What would you say to her if you saw her again?

You can reflect their energy level.
Child, jumping up and down using a big voice: Today I get to see my Tío at the hospital!
Teacher, using an appropriately loud voice: You get to see your Tío!

You can reflect what you see in their body language.

Child, twisting a pillow in their hands: I'm worried I made Grandpa get sick.

Caregiver: You're really twisting that pillow and worried that you made Grandpa sick.

Questions:

After reflecting what a child has said and done, you can invite them to share more about their thoughts and feelings with open-ended questions. These are questions that encourage children to say more than just "yes" or "no." Ex: What did you play with your abuelita? vs. Did you and your abuelita play together? Asking open-ended questions is a useful skill to help children understand their thoughts and emotions and to decide what activities or actions could be helpful for them in the moment.

Common questions kids ask

When a major life change like illness, death, divorce, a move, or no longer being able to see someone they love occurs, young children may ask questions over and over. This is their way of trying to make sense of what happened. Young children often don't understand that death is permanent, or all of the ways the loss may impact their lives, so it's helpful to repeat the same simple, concrete answer each time they ask. (Teachers: we suggest asking what the family is telling the child so that the story can be consistent.) For some children it can be useful to create a short picture book about the story so they can refer to it when the questions come up again. Remember, nurturing your relationship with a grieving child through your supportive presence is more important than having the "right answer." No one is ever going to have all the right answers when it comes to grief, but there is power in letting children voice their questions.

It's okay to not know the answer to a child's question. Sometimes offering an honest "I don't know" goes a long way. Offer yourself some grace to not always know exactly what to say or do as that's a normal part of caring for children.

Here are some common questions children ask and suggestions for how to respond:

Will you die? Will I die?

"Everyone dies at some point, but hopefully we will live for many more years of playing and being together. We go to the doctor and eat healthy foods and do everything we can to keep our bodies working well."

Are they coming back tomorrow?

This common question is connected to young children's inability to understand that some changes are permanent, and others will have long-lasting effects in their life.

- "You're wondering if Mommy is going to come back tomorrow. No, Honey, remember that she died, which means her body stopped working. We won't get to see her or hug her, but we can look at pictures and talk about her. Would you like to do that?"

- "Daddy isn't coming back tomorrow. He moved to a state called Iowa, it's very far from here. Let's go look at the calendar and point to the day and month when you get to visit him."

Did I do something to make them die/get sick/go to prison/leave?

"You are wondering if you did something to make it happen. Lots of people worry about that, but you didn't do anything to make Mommy die/get sick/leave/go to prison."

Where is Grandpa now?

"You want to know where Grandpa is now. What do you think?" (Reflecting the question first helps you to find out what the child is actually asking). If your child wants to know what happened to the body of the person, answer honestly and concretely: "Grandpa's body was at the hospital and now it's at a place called a funeral home."

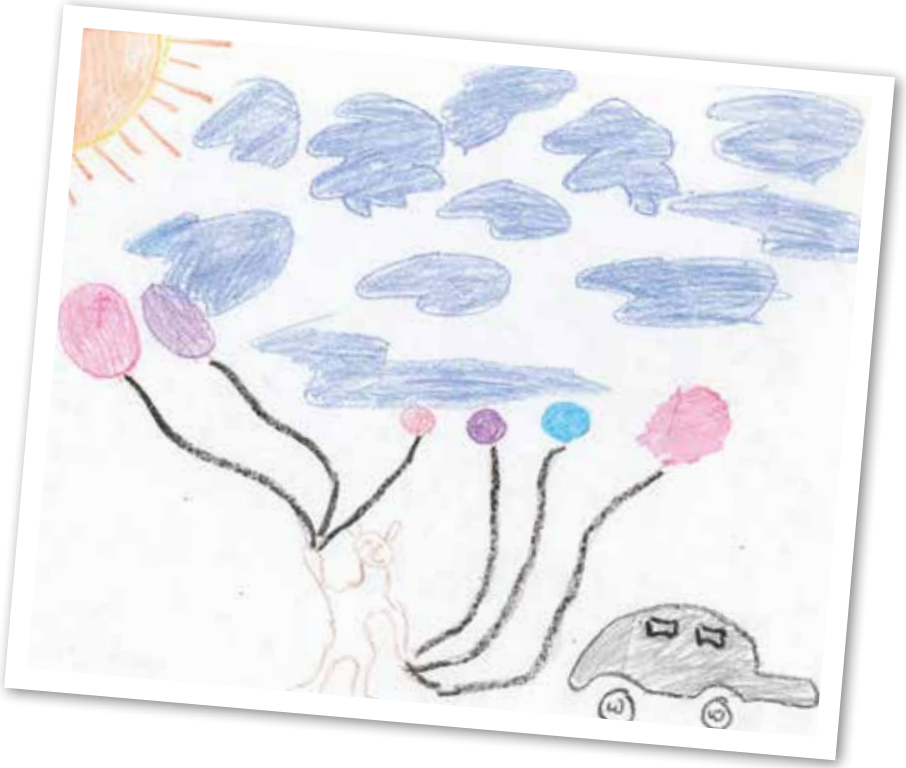
Responding to questions about what happens to someone when they die.

"When a person dies, their body stops working. They can't eat or laugh or poop or cry or walk or talk anymore. That means they are dead. When someone is dead, we need to do something with their body, which doesn't have any feeling in it anymore. Mommy's body was taken to a place called a funeral home, where they're taking care of her body for us."

- If the person is to be buried, you can (as the child asks and expresses interest in knowing) say, "One way we will honor and remember Daddy is by having his body in a kind of box called a casket. We're going to pick a special place to bury his body, and then we can go visit where they put his body."

- If the person is to be cremated, you might say, "Mommy's body doesn't feel anything anymore; she isn't in it anymore, so we're going to have Mommy's body cremated, which means her body is put into a special machine called a crematory that gets really hot and turns her body into ashes. Then they give us the ashes. We can keep some of them to remember her, or we can put some of them in places she loved, like the beach and the mountains."

- If the child is asking from a more existential perspective of what happens when someone dies, how you answer depends on your relationship with the child and your personal beliefs. As a teacher, you might say, "You want to



know what happens after someone dies. What do you think happens? Have you asked anyone in your family? People have lots of different ideas about what happens. Let's check in with your (mom/dad/caregiver) when they come to pick you up and ask if they can talk to you about what they think." As a parent/caregiver, it's helpful to distinguish between what happens to the body (Grandpa's body stopped working) and what you believe about other aspects of death, including what you believe happens when someone dies.

What to expect at different ages

While everyone grieves differently, there are some behaviors and emotions commonly expressed by children depending on their developmental level. No matter how old a child is, it can be helpful to read through each of the age ranges, as children move from one level to the next at very different rates and a child's chronological age may differ from their developmental age. You may notice there are some similarities across age ranges. For example, anxiety, which can show up in different ways, is common for grieving people of all ages. Children, no matter what age, find consistency, routine, and flexibility to be helpful.

Please note: while the descriptions of common responses and ways to help can apply to all types of loss, the "Concept of death" noted in each stage is specific to loss after a death. It may be a signpost for how the child in your life is understanding their loss, even if it's not a death.

A child's developmental level is influenced by more than just their actual age. Trauma, including grief, and a variety of life challenges can inform where a child is along the spectrum of development. These stages are also not rigid and a child might show a mix of responses from more than one developmental stage.

0 to 2 years:

Even children this young are aware of loss and separation and experience grief. Their loss is understood as absence — someone or something is missing in their world. Since they rely heavily on their external environment, significant disruptions to their routine or schedule can cause discomfort, irritability, or distress. In addition, they sense and respond to the emotions and behaviors of adults in their environment. Nurturing, predictable relationships with trusted adults are crucial for babies and young toddlers.

Concept of death

Infants and toddlers are concrete in their thinking and have no cognitive concept of death — it is temporary and reversible.

Common responses to grief

- Increased separation anxiety or not wanting the adult to be out of their sight.
- May regress on milestones they already met, or delayed onset of anticipated milestones. For example, a child may start walking or talking a little later.
- Changes in feeding and sleeping habits. Babies and children may wish to eat more frequently, ask for more comfort foods, or avoid eating. You may notice a lot of anxiety arising around bedtime, and children having difficulty getting to sleep.

- Increased crying and distress.
- Infants and young toddlers do not have words to express their feelings or needs so they use their behaviors to communicate: crying more, being clingy or irritable, and expressing an increased need for nurturing.
- Toddlers who can communicate verbally may search for their caregiver, potentially repeatedly asking "Where's Mommy?" or "Daddy?", since they do not understand the concept of permanence.

Ways to help

- Provide increased comfort through more nurturing physical contact, such as holding them more, rocking them, and making eye contact.
- Provide a consistent and predictable routine, especially around sleep and eating patterns.
- If they are asking questions, it is important to use short, concrete, honest, and consistent answers such as "Daddy's heart stopped working, that means he died".
- Model appropriate grief responses for your child.
- Access support for yourself to help meet your emotional and physical needs.

Ways to model appropriate grief responses:

"Daddy's crying right now because I'm thinking a lot about Grandma and how much time we used to have together. Sometimes when I think about her, I feel sad and cry."

"I went for a long walk earlier today because I was feeling really mad that Aunt Rita is in prison. I felt mad I don't get to call her whenever I want. Walking made me feel better, what's something you do when you feel angry?"

"I'm grouchy this morning because I didn't sleep very well last night — I had a scary dream. I'm going to make sure to take a nap later today, at the same time you take yours!"

2 to 4 years:

Children this age don't fully understand death is permanent. Because preschoolers tend to be in the here and now, their grief reactions are typically brief but can be very intense. It's normal for children this age to believe the world revolves around them. They will usually express themselves through their behavior and play.

Concept of death

Young children see death as reversible, and are starting to wonder if death could happen to other people they know. You might hear questions like: "My mom died? When will she be home?" and "Will you die too? What about me?"

Common responses to grief

- General anxiety.
- Behavior regression — may need help with tasks they've already learned or habits they had previously outgrown.
- Irregular sleep.
- Crying.
- Clinginess/need to be held.
- Irritability.
- Temper tantrums.

- Telling the story to anyone, including strangers.
- Repetitive questions.
- Magical thinking — they think their thoughts and words have power.
- Concerned about their safety and who will take care of them.

Ways to help

Create a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability, especially around starting and ending the day.

- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.
- Provide short, honest explanation of the death. "Mommy died. Her body stopped working." Use the words "dead" and "died." Avoid euphemisms such as "gone", "passed on", or "lost".
- Answer questions honestly.
- Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- Provide opportunities for play. Big energy play can be important for many children, such as opportunities to move their bodies, make loud noises, and get messy with creative materials. Sometimes children will be drawn to quieter, creative activities such as puppets, dress up, quietly drawing, or painting.
- To help re-establish a sense of control, give simple choices whenever possible. "Do you want hot or cold cereal?"

5 to 8 years:

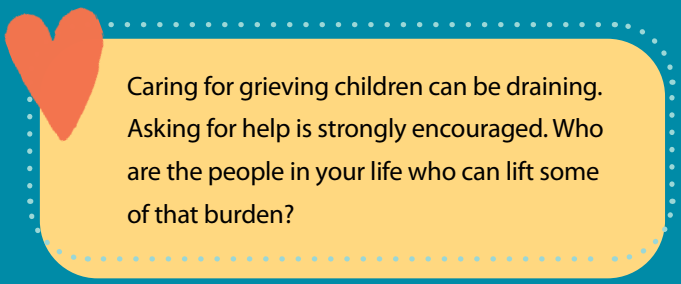
Children this age are exploring their independence and trying tasks on their own. They are still concrete thinkers, with a tendency towards magical/fantasy thoughts.

Concept of death

School-age children often still see death as reversible. They can also feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die. They may say things like: "It's my fault. I was mad and wished she'd die."

Common responses to grief

- Increased anxiety, including concerns about safety and abandonment.
- Regressive behaviors — may need help with tasks they've already learned (can't tie shoes, bedwetting).
- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits.
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened.
- Repetitive questions — How? Why? Who else?
- Nightmares.
- Behavior changes: high/low energy, kicking/hitting.
- Physical complaints: stomach aches, headaches, body pain.


Caring for grieving children can be draining. Asking for help is strongly encouraged. Who are the people in your life who can lift some of that burden?

Ways to help

- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance. As kids get older their need for nurturing may look different. Try to be flexible and creative in meeting their needs. Some examples include hugs, high-fives, cuddling on the couch, an extra story at bedtime, or special time in the rocking chair together.

- Explain the death honestly using concrete language: "Daddy's heart stopped working." Use the words "dead" and "died". Avoid euphemisms such as "gone", "passed on", "lost". Keep it simple and let their questions lead the way in sharing more information and details.

- Be prepared for repetitive questions. These repetitive questions are very common, and does not mean you didn't explain things well or that something's wrong. It may be a sign that the child is looking for additional information and trying to make sense of this significant loss in their life. It can be helpful to offer consistent responses but also be willing to phrase things a little differently or add additional information as needed.

- Similar to the previous age range, provide opportunities for big energy and creative play.

- Allow children to talk about the experience or not talk about it.

- Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or tomorrow morning?"

Grief in the everyday

How to support grieving children in daily life

So far we've explored how grief looks at various developmental stages, how to talk with children about loss, and some of the questions grieving children commonly ask. At this point, you might wonder, "But what does grief really look like, in daily life?" In this section, we'll share some stories of how grief can show up for children as part of their day-to-day routines. Each story includes two possible ways to respond to a grieving child, and to the needs driving their behavior: one that might be a more common reaction, and one that better supports the child and their needs in that moment.

A frequent reaction for young children is to regress, both behaviorally and emotionally. Preschoolers might temporarily lose skills they've mastered, like dressing themselves, using the potty, tying their shoes, or helping with household chores. With children as young as infants, you might notice changes in their eating and sleeping patterns, or an increase in clingy behavior. Young children may have strong emotions over seemingly small events, like dropping a favorite teddy bear or banging a knee, and a decreased ability to self-soothe. Providing extra nurturing and support can help preschoolers to feel safe and secure. You can also say something like, "Looks like it's hard to tie your shoes. I know you know how, but let me help you this time. Next time you can try again."

Child: Josué

Loss: His abuelita (grandmother) has died

Grief challenge: Getting out of the house in the morning

Josué is five years old and is grieving the death of his abuelita, who lived with and cared for him. On school days, Abuelita woke him in the morning, fed him breakfast, helped him dress, and took him to school. Since his abuelita's death, mornings have been hard at home. Josué sometimes cries when he realizes it's not his grandmother waking him. Breakfast and dressing times are tough too, with Josué often becoming very upset over the clothes his parents pick out, or the food he's given. The family is experiencing all of the emotions associated with grief, and Josué's parents are also struggling with the additional demands on their time and energy.

This morning, Josué seems really confused and upset about the morning routine, and about the rest of his day. Earlier, he cried and threw his clothes around his bedroom, and now is refusing to eat his cereal. Exhausted and already stressed about their day, his parents quickly become frustrated: "Josué, we have to get to work and you have to get to school! Eat your cereal, then go potty, put on your shoes, put on your coat and backpack and let's go — now!"

Josué bursts into tears, and slowly spoons food into his mouth. After finally eating and settling a bit, he struggles

to deal with the velcro straps on his shoes, again bursts into tears, and throws the shoes across the room. After a morning full of meltdowns, the family leaves in a rush, 15 minutes later than they'd planned.

Many parents are stressed in the morning as they try to get everyone ready and out the door on time. For parents who are grieving themselves, patience and the capacity to slow down with their children may be stretched even thinner than usual. Here's another approach for responding to Josué's morning-routine struggles.

In the evening, Mamá, Papá, and Josué gather up three of his favorite stuffed animals. Mamá shows Josué that her stuffed animal is Mamá, and Papá's is Josué. **Together, they act out tomorrow morning's routine: waking up gently, getting dressed, having breakfast, then getting ready to leave.** Josué is excited to play too, and all three of them use their stuffed animals to practice how tomorrow morning will go. **Next, Mamá and Papá show**

When kids have a tough morning, that can often lead to the caregiver's entire day feeling off. When this happens, try to take a few minutes to do something to get yourself grounded again. This could be something like a few minutes of intentional breathing in your car, a quick walk outside, or calling a friend for a five-minute vent session. What works for you when you need a quick reset?

Josué a visual schedule (they found many examples online), which uses pictures to illustrate each step. They show Josué how he can flip over the picture after finishing a task. Excited for the morning, he asks to sleep with his "Mamá, Papá, y Josué" stuffed animals that night.

In the morning, his parents wake him about five minutes earlier than usual, along with the animals. After a few minutes for morning snuggles, they briefly act out the routine once again and go over the visual schedule. **Throughout the morning, if Josué seems to be unclear about what happens next, they can ask him to look at his schedule, or briefly roleplay the next step with the stuffed animals.** They leave the house only five minutes later than their goal.

Child: Miriam

Loss: Her uncle has died

Grief challenge: School drop-off and separation anxiety

Before Miriam's uncle died, she had no trouble going to school. Since his death, drop-off has been challenging. She now clings to her mother, Nia, begging her not to leave. Every morning now, Miriam cries, "Don't leave me! If you leave, I know you'll die too and never come back!"

Knowing that Miriam's mother needs to drop her child off and leave for work, the teacher, Laila, tells her, "Just go — she'll be okay once you're gone. I'll take good care of her!" After Nia leaves, Miriam cries harder, and has a tough time participating safely and appropriately for the rest of the day.

Later that day, when Nia arrives to pick up her daughter, she and Laila make a plan for tomorrow morning, one that involves support at home and at school for this tough transition. That night, Miriam talks with Nia about her uncle, and about the fears that have come up since his death:

"You miss Uncle Jay a lot. I know you've also been worried that I will die too."

"If you die there won't be anyone to take care of me! I don't want you to die!"

"You really worry I might die too. I want you to know that I take very good care of myself, and make sure I'm careful

when I drive in my car. I've also made a plan that if anything did happen to me, your Auntie Elena would be there to take care of you."

"Auntie Elena would take care of me? I love Auntie Elena!"

The next morning, Nia shows Miriam a picture of three clocks with the time that she drops her off at school, picks her up, and the time they'll be together at home again that evening. She also ties a piece of yarn around Miriam's wrist, and her own. She explains that every time each one looks at the yarn, they can say "I love you, and I'll see you soon!" Once they arrive at school, Nia and Miriam show off their "bracelets" to Laila. Miriam has brought the paper with three clocks, and shows Nia that's it's now the time on the first clock, and reminds her that she'll pick her up at the time on the second. Laila promises to show it to Miriam anytime she wonders when her mother will come back. Nia says a short goodbye, and points again to the clock that shows when she'll be back, then to the yarn around their wrists and tells Miriam, "I love you and I'll see you soon!" She quickly leaves while Laila takes Miriam to the art area, her favorite spot in the classroom. When Nia arrives later that day for pick-up, she shows Miriam that it's the time on the second clock, and when they're back home again, that it's the time on the third. Nia continues making reminders about their "bracelets" and check-ins about drop-off, pick-up, and back-home times part of their daily routine.

Child: Amaya

Loss: Her younger sister has died

Grief challenge: Disruptive behaviors in the classroom

Since Amaya's little sister, Sarra, died, she's had a hard time learning and playing in her classroom. Amaya often becomes very angry when other children don't do what she wants, or when teachers tell her it's time to transition to a different activity. When she's angry, she may cry, yell, or stomp away from her friends. Just recently, she had an especially hard day, including a number of meltdowns over play and various activities. Amaya became increasingly frustrated with another child, and eventually hit him. Her teachers were taken aback, as this was very unlike her behavior before Sarra's death.

Seeing Amaya hit another child, her teacher Zayn rushed right over. Flustered and surprised, he responded "Amaya! You know we don't hit in this classroom! Please take a break right now in the quiet corner!" He tended to the child that had been hit, and then went to Amaya, who was clearly very upset.

Zayn knew that he wanted to respond differently the next time Amaya became angry. He talked with her parents and the other classroom teachers to create a plan. Her parents shared that they hadn't been talking very much about Amaya's sister at home, as it just felt too painful.

They wondered if some opportunities to talk and think about her at home and at school might be helpful. **Zayn and the other teachers decided to also use tools such as helping language and The Angry Box to help Amaya with managing her anger and upset.**

That night, Amaya's family sat down together, and each drew a picture of a special time they had with Sarra. They shared their drawings, and favorite stories about her. Her parents noticed that Amaya seemed happy, sad, and relieved to understand it was okay to talk about her sister.

At school the next day, Zayn noticed a moment when Amaya was calm, and asked if he could show her something special called an Angry Box. He explained that it's okay to be angry, but it's not okay to hurt people. **The next time she started to feel angry or upset, she could use the box to help her express those feelings.** In the box, he included bubble wrap to pop, a liquid motion timer, bean bags to toss against the wall, newspaper to shred, and empty plastic bottles to stomp on. Later, he notices Amaya's behavior start to escalate as she becomes frustrated playing house. He goes to her, and using helping language says, "I see you're frustrated right now. I'd be frustrated too. How about we go check out the Angry Box?"

Amaya is frustrated, but also excited to try out the items in the box. She pops some bubbles, stomps on the plastic bottles, throws the beanbags, and eventually sits down and turns the motion timer back and forth, watching the colored

bubbles slowly move from one side to the next. A little while later, she returns to the home area, and begins to play with a baby doll she's named Sarra. Zayn stays with her, and talks with Amaya about her sister's favorite food and games, and Amaya teaches him Sarra's favorite song. **They continue to use the Angry Box whenever needed, and the teachers offer opportunities for Amaya and the other children to share about someone or something that's no longer in their lives, and that they miss.**

Child: Kayla

Loss: Her parents have recently divorced

Grief challenge: Bedtime routine

Three-year-old Kayla is grieving after her parents' divorce, which led to one dad moving out of the house. At night, her dads typically put her to bed together, one brushing her teeth while she sat on the other's lap; one tucking her in as the other started reading stories; and so on. Bedtime has been difficult since these family changes, and Kayla has had tantrums and lots of tears as her father, Baz, does his best to soothe her and get her to sleep.

Several nights a week, she's been falling asleep later than usual, which then makes the mornings difficult as well. Baz is already exhausted and overwhelmed himself as he adjusts to life as a single parent, and without his partner.

Tonight, Kayla is crying and asking for Daddy over and over. "I want Daddy to read the stories tonight! I don't want you!" Baz tells her it's time to sleep, and becomes increasingly frustrated. "You'll see Daddy this weekend, now close your eyes!" Eventually he becomes so frustrated that he puts the book down and says, "That's it, we're done — no more stories tonight!" After he leaves the room abruptly, Kayla cries even harder and begins yelling for her Daddy. Eventually Baz returns to the room and tries to calm her down. She finally falls asleep much later than her usual

bedtime, and Baz knows the morning is going to be hard on both of them. He decides he wants to try something different tomorrow night.

Over dinner, Baz asks Kayla if she'd like to put a picture of Daddy in her bathroom and bedroom, so she can see him as they brush her teeth and tuck her in. She responds with an enthusiastic "Yes!", so they move pictures into both rooms. She holds Daddy's picture as Baz brushes her teeth, and gives the picture in the bedroom a big kiss before crawling into bed. As Baz starts to read the first story, Kayla begins to cry, and ask for Daddy once again. This time, Baz responds by saying:

"You really want Daddy to be here."

"Yes I want Daddy!"

"You really want Daddy! I know you miss him very much, and I know he misses you too. It's hard not to see him every night, and you will get to see him this weekend. What story do you want him to read you this weekend?"

"I want to read *Sleep Like a Tiger* with Daddy."

"You want to read *Sleep Like a Tiger* with Daddy. We'll have to tell him that! Would you like me to read that to you now?"

Baz lets Kayla kiss Daddy's picture once more, then finishes reading to her. He's thrilled that she falls asleep very close to her usual bedtime.

Big energy activities

Children's grief is often seen through the expression of what we call "big energy". Big energy can stem from a variety of different emotions and is an important part of play for many children. While identifying these emotions can be helpful, finding an outlet for them also helps kids to learn that powerful emotions are valid and not "bad". Here are several ideas for helping children express and manage big energy that can be done either at home or at school. Your child can help you gather some of the items and add their own ideas of things that would be helpful. Remember, you don't necessarily need to purchase anything special for these activities, many items can be found at home or in the classroom — get creative!

- Build an "angry box" filled with items that they can use to safely express their anger. Some items may be: a pillow to yell into, newspaper to shred, empty plastic bottles to stomp on, bean bags to throw, bubble wrap to pop, a timer to set for doing jumping jacks.

- Create a "cozy corner" filled with soothing or comforting items. Some ideas include soft blankets, weighted blankets, stuffed animals, liquid motion timers, headphones, and drawing supplies.

While we talk about "Big Energy" with a child focus, it can also be helpful for adults to work through similar feelings. Maybe your big energy release comes in the form of singing loudly to music, journaling each thought that comes into your head until your hand is tired of writing, or getting sweaty shooting hoops. What are your preferred ways to let off some steam?

- With your child, make a list for the refrigerator of things to do when big emotions or big energy bubbles up. Some options could be: 1. Have an expressive dance party (Is it an angry dance? A sad dance?); 2. Run or play outside; 3. Jump up and down; 4. Listen to music quietly; 5. Take five deep breaths to the count of breathing in for four and then out for eight beats; 6. Stomp your feet. What else can you think of for your list?

- Make a picture book of "people who love me": a book of pictures of people in the child's life and the role they play — maybe even include a photo of a teacher. This could be used as preparation for drop-off time or for other transitions and could help with general worry, and distress about the health and safety of primary caregiver(s).

- Make a book or list of "things I love to do" — include a separate list for home and school. Children can look at this list before transitions from home to school and back home again as a way to reconnect with activities they can look forward to in each place.

- Use puppets or dolls to communicate feelings, ask questions, or role-play different ideas or scenarios, especially transitions.

Remember, children's work is done through their play and the adults in their lives can help by providing safe spaces and creative ways to express themselves.


Remember
to take care
of yourself

Help for the caregiver

One of the most beneficial things caregivers can do to help their kids is to take good care of themselves. This is often easier said than done when caring for a young child, especially one who is grieving. Whether you are a parent or teacher, spending long hours with children who need a high level of support can be exhausting. If you yourself are also grieving, the intensity of grief can lead to irritability, anxiety, and a general sense of being on edge. Sometimes the last thing an adult feels they have time for is themselves. However, self-care for the caregiver may be the most important aspect of supporting a grieving child. Self-care is not being selfish, it is being mindful of your own needs and addressing them. Self-care helps you sustain and replenish yourself so that you can continue to provide for your kids and keep your body, mind, and spirit in balance along the way. It also helps you rebuild your energy so you can share that with others.

Self-care is something, like grief, that is unique and individual. Some people are drawn to physical activity while others are more interested in social, creative, or spiritual outlets. There is no "right" self-care strategy, instead the "right" plan is the one that works for you. Listen to your body, mind, and heart! Use the following ideas to start your own self-care plan and remember, sometimes it takes a few tries to figure out exactly what self-care you need in that moment — don't give up!

Physical: Eat nourishing food, drink lots of water, get adequate sleep, exercise, take breaks/vacations, remember to breathe.

Social: Spend time with friends and family, do fun things, be creative.

Emotional: Make room for your emotions, find comfort activities, do something that calms you, listen to soothing music, write in a journal, join a bereavement support group, talk with a counselor or spiritual advisor.

Spiritual: Participate in spiritual activities, connect with nature, pray, be mindful, meditate, practice yoga.

Rest: Get plenty of sleep, take time outs, practice relaxation techniques and mindfulness, lower productivity expectations for yourself (aka: let go of making it perfect).

Play: Make time for fun, laughter, physical activities, find a hobby, do something you love.

Distraction: Get your mind off of it, go to a movie, read a book, play video games, watch TV.

Connection: Call or get together with friends and family, join a group, or consider volunteering (in a way that feels nourishing, rather than taxing).

Asking for help

Asking for and accepting help can be difficult, especially when you are not used to doing it. Here are some tips:

Remind yourself asking for help is not a burden. People like to be useful and especially like direction when they are unsure what they can do to help. Try to be specific in your request. "My husband was always the one to take the garbage to the curb. Would you mind pulling my cans out on Thursday night and replacing them on Friday morning?" or "I'm having a really hard time taking care of myself right now. Would you mind helping me get to the grocery store?"

Sometimes it's hard to identify exactly what you need or what someone can offer. Try "I'm really struggling. I don't know what to ask for, but I could use some support right now."

It can be surprising who shows up for you in times of grief, and not everyone has an extensive circle of support. Sometimes someone anonymous, like a hotline or online chat, can be your most comfortable connection. For specific resources go to page 57.

How to help those in grief

If you are not the person grieving, but want to help the caregiver, here are some suggestions:

- Provide space for them to talk about their feelings and experiences, and share memories. Listening is often the most valuable gift you can give to a grieving person.
- Try to avoid platitudes such as "he's in a better place" or "everything happens for a reason." Instead, be willing to listen without judgment.
- Hold off on offering advice, unless it is specifically asked for.
- Offer practical help such as cooking a meal, babysitting, cleaning the house, or running an errand.
- Be patient — remember grief has no timeline and is unique to each individual.
- Encourage professional help when appropriate. Don't be shy to provide resources if it seems someone needs additional support.

Even when the loss isn't something directly related to your life or relationship, sometimes supporting those who are grieving takes a personal toll as well. Don't forget to tend to your own needs and listen to the reactions you experience while also helping others.

When additional help is needed

Sometimes your self-care plan needs to include the assistance of a professional. While many of the situations listed below are common with grief for a short amount of time, if you find yourself or someone you care about experiencing any of the following, please seek out additional help from a qualified mental health or medical professional.

- Serious or long lasting symptoms of depression ` including, but not limited to: prolonged sadness, ongoing feelings of sluggishness, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, inability to concentrate, social withdrawal or thoughts of harming yourself or someone else.
- Inability to complete daily routines (such as not getting out of bed in the morning, not feeding yourself or your children, not showering/brushing teeth/etc.).
- Increased use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs or other substances.
- Gaining or losing a significant amount of weight.
- Experiencing uncontrollable anxiety or panic attacks.

Finding a therapist or counselor that you connect with doesn't always happen easily. Sometimes talking to two or three professionals before you settle with the one who most closely matches your personality or preferred style of communication can be helpful in the long run. While it can take more time and effort, your dedication will likely be rewarded with a more fulfilling therapeutic experience.

Here are some indicators that a child may need additional, professional support

- Prolonged depression or anxiety.
- Significant difficulties at school.
- Interference in their daily routines including significant changes in sleeping or eating patterns.
- Withdrawing from activities, including play.
- Chronic digestive issues or complaints of physical pain.
- Thoughts of harming themselves or others.

If you or someone in your life is in crisis, there is help available.

For urgent or crisis situations, dialing 911 is one commonly known option for emergency response. The additional options listed below are free, confidential, and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, unless otherwise noted. These lines often provide options — you can call, text, or chat online (check websites for details).

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call 800-273-TALK (8255)
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Crisis Text Line

Text HELLO to 741741
crisistextline.org/texting-in

Teen Line

Call 800-TLC-TEEN (800-852-8336) from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Pacific Standard Time (PST), or text "TEEN" to 839863 between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. PST.
teenlineonline.org

TrevorLifeline for LGBTQ Youth

Call 866-488-7386 or text "TREVOR" to 1-202-304-1200 (available Monday - Friday, 3 to 10 p.m., Eastern Standard Time (EST).
thetrevorproject.org

Veterans Crisis Line

For veterans in crisis, and their family and friends, call 800-273-8255 and press 1, or send a text message to 838255. Support for deaf and hard of hearing individuals is available.
veteranscrisisline.net

Resources:

The Dougy Center's online bookstore provides a variety of resources for children, parents and others wanting to help grieving children. Visit dougy.org or call 503-775-5683 for more information.

Guidebooks:

35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child

Helping Children Cope with Death

What About the Kids? Understanding Their Needs in Funeral Planning & Services

Activity Books:

After a Suicide Death: An Activity Book for Grieving Kids

After a Murder: A Workbook for Grieving Kids

After a Death: An Activity Book for Children

Memories Matter: Activities for Grieving Children & Teens

Family Ties: Through an Advanced Serious Illness

Brochures:

Helping Children Cope with Death

After a Suicide Death: Ten Tips for Helping Children & Teens

DVDs:

Helping Teens Cope with Death

Understanding Suicide, Supporting Children

Supporting the Grieving Child

Supporting the Grieving Student

When Your Patient is Dying: Quality Care for Children & Families

Online:

dougy.org

tdcschooltoolkit.org

dougy.org/podcast

Additional resources:

For families with a member experiencing incarceration:
The Night Dad Went to Jail: What to expect when someone you love goes to jail, by Melissa Higgins

Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a family when a loved one is incarcerated, by Becky Birtha

For families with child welfare involvement:
Families Change: A book for children experiencing termination of parental rights, by Julie Nelson

The Neglected Transition: Building a Relational Home for Children Entering Foster Care, by Monique Mitchell

The National Foster Parent Association, nfpaonline.org

Fostering Families Today, a bimonthly resource magazine: fosteringfamiliestoday.com

For families experiencing separation and divorce:
Why Do Families Change? Our first talk about separation and divorce, by Dr. Jillian Robert

For families living with an advanced serious illness:
Someone I love is Sick: Helping very young children cope with cancer in the family, by Kathleen McCue

For families facing many types of transition and loss:
Sesame Street in Communities is a one-stop resource on numerous parenting and support topics including grief, divorce, incarceration, military deployment, self-care, resilience, offering comfort, and more. Find this online at sesamestreetincommunities.org

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