

Helping Your Child Cope with Grief

Discussing death and loss with a child can be difficult, especially when you are dealing with grief yourself. What your child may already know and understand about death will be dependent on his or her age and experiences in life, but it is important to remember there is no right or wrong way for you or your child to feel while coping with loss. However, there are important things to remember when approaching the topic with your child.

Being honest and encouraging questions are two primary philosophies when discussing death, dying, or loss with your child. Create an open and safe environment for him or her to share, which will be necessary for them to feel comfortable and leave the discussion with a positive experience. Children below age 6 tend to be very literal. Providing them with concrete answers in basic terms will be helpful for them to understand and feel at peace with the loss. Try to avoid euphemisms, such as “went away,” “went to sleep,” or the family “lost” the person (Perkel, 2012), to avoid confusion or cause unintentional fear. Children ages 6-10 begin to understand the finality of death, but speaking in clear terms and giving honest explanations is the best way to assist the child in his or her grief journey. As your child becomes a teenager, he or she is more likely to understand deeper concepts. They may begin to question mortality and search for deeper meaning to death. Recognizing their feelings and empathizing will be helpful approaches when speaking with your teen. Your efforts will do wonders for your child in helping him or her through this difficult time and preparing them for the difficult times that are to come.

As children learn to deal with death and loss, they may need their space and time to develop understanding. If you feel you are not in the mindset to address the issue yourself, do not hesitate to seek counsel from a family member or friend, a counselor, clergy, other community support or even books or online resources. Remember that dealing with grief is a process. Your child might not cope by using the same methods you do, but encourage them to experience their grief in ways that feel comfortable for them. Watch for signs of radical behavior changes is important and inform the support system around your child to do the same. Parents cannot shield children from all the sad and difficult losses that they will experience in their life. But arming them with the resources to cope and manage their feelings will give them a gift that lasts a lifetime.

Perkel, D. (2012). Helping your child deal with death. Kid’s Health. The Nemours Foundation.