

# Helping Children Grieve & Grow



**A Guide For Those Who Care**

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## A few words of welcome from the authors

This booklet is designed for you to use to learn more about how children experience loss and grief and what you as an adult can do to help children through this time. It is not meant to be a complete book, but to provide you with useful information and encouragement.

People ask us, can children grieve and grow? Can they withstand the harsh weather of change and still grow strong and hearty?

We say, "Yes they can. Yes, they do." We know this is so because we ourselves have grown through profound childhood losses. We say *yes* also because we have worked with many children and adults throughout our combined 52 years in counseling and educational practices. We have seen their pain subside—have seen hope and vitality rekindled.

Imagine a small acorn that has dropped on the ruins of a fallen oak. The tiny acorn gradually absorbs the greatness of the life force of the fallen oak so that the dream of its seed can be fulfilled. To break the shell's seed from darkness into light requires effort. Under conditions that nurture, the acorn does

grow. As the Skin Horse says in the story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, "It doesn't happen all at once, it takes time. But when it happens it makes a real human being."

As adults, we can be the soil that encourages growth. For this reason we have written a CAN-DO booklet for you. When a child is grieving there is much you can do to provide the conditions that will promote growth.

To help a child grieve and grow is a great undertaking. Thanks for being there. May the vision of wholeness guide your way. May your belief in children fuel your determination. May we—may they—grow and bloom into flowers of compassion and beauty.

*Anna O'Keefe      Jane Gray*

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# How can I understand the losses of children?

**What is Loss?** Loss is being without someone or something that was loved, familiar, important or desired. Especially for children a loss may be based on safety, comfort, and familiarity, rather than on what adults speak of as love or affection. A loss can be of a person, a place, an animal, an object, or even a dream or a hope. Here are some ways to think about the losses of childhood.

## Six categories of childhood loss:

1. Relationship loss (Usually people and animals)
2. The loss of objects that give comfort and connection (toys, blankets, clothing, jewelry)
3. Loss of a secure, familiar environment
4. Loss of self (Ways of being and doing that define us uniquely)
5. Loss of skills, abilities and competencies
6. Loss of familiar habits and routine

## Losses of children — easily recognized:

- The death of family members and friends
- Being sexually or physically abused
- Witnessing someone murdered or raped
- Destructive acts of humans or nature
- Divorcing parents
- Living with alcoholic or abusive adults

## Childhood losses — often not recognized:

- Friends or relatives moving away
- Adoptive or foster home changes
- Changing teachers
- Personal or family health changes
- Hospitalization
- Failure to be chosen
- Shunning of friends or adults
- Changes in family patterns
- Being held back a grade

## What you can do now:

The first step may be just what you are doing: to be there and to acknowledge the losses of the children you care for by recognizing and naming them. When you name something you give it value. To identify a child's loss is a way to show that the child's experience is important and real.

Many times a major loss contains many other losses. It helps to recognize these secondary losses so they too can be named, acknowledged and grieved. Think about the losses you can identify from your own childhood. Make a list. List also the losses of a child, or children, you care for. Since there are so many variables, only the child experiencing a loss can determine the importance and the meaning the loss holds. Ask and listen.

Work to assure a secure and nourishing environment. Watch, listen, offer assurances, and at times provide boundaries, coach and guide. Your continued presence as well as what you say and do can show that you believe happiness and peace will return.

## Loss means different things to different children.

A loss is a highly personal and individualized experience. The importance of a loss is based on many things, including needs, desires, routines, presumed meanings and present and past experience. The best ways to understand what a loss means to a child is to ask, to observe a child's play, to listen closely to their words, behaviors and actions. Let the child be your first resource.

**Loss spans a lifetime.** Loss is not only an event, it is also a process. When our life story is interrupted in some way, by events, trauma, or pain, the path through grief for any particular child can be a lifelong process of discovery. A loss that a child experiences early in life may have an impact on the child's life at other stages. The meaning and impact of the loss may be different to the child at different stages of life, and the frequent re-working on this is entirely normal.



*"Although the world  
is full of sorrow,  
it is full also  
of the overcoming of it."*

— Helen Keller



# How will I know a child is grieving?

Grief is the word we use to talk about a mix of reactions children and adults may have when a loss is realized. A child experiencing a loss is experiencing absence. Usually this is an absence that was both unwanted and unacceptable. Children often grieve in small doses and may experience absence from a loss more than once. Children usually don't tell you they are grieving. You can tell by what they say and do.

Because no two children grieve the same there are no magic formulas to make your caregiving certain or easy. Stages and tasks of grief have been suggested, but they have never been shown to be certain. What we give here are some common reactions that have been observed among grieving children. These common reactions may at times alarm or worry you. When you provide empathy, reassurance and calm guidance the behaviors and reactions that concern you are likely to subside. A gauge for whether a problem exists may include: 1) Duration - how long the behavior lasts, 2) Intensity - how strong or explosive is the behavior, 3) Whether the behavior interferes with anyone's safety 4) Whether the behavior seriously interrupts the child's development.

## Physical reactions

- Changes in appetite (Overeating/Under eating)
- Bowel and bladder disturbances/changes
- Temporary slowing of reactions
- Increases/decreases in activity
- Rashes
- Breathing disturbances
- Exaggeration of allergies
- Increased numbers of colds/infections
- Headaches, stomach aches
- Bumping into things - Unfamiliar body

## Mental reactions

- Impaired concentration or self esteem
- Preoccupation- thinking about the loss
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Increased nightmares/sleep disturbances
- Thinking others are watching you
- Sightings of a dead person

## Spiritual reactions

- Feeling lost and empty
- Feeling forsaken, abandoned
- Feeling judged/condemned by God
- Questioning the right to be alive
- Questioning religious beliefs
- Feeling the presence of the person who died
- Feeling dislocated - don't belong
- Feeling disconnected - not cared for
- Extreme pessimism or optimism
- Feeling the presence or absence of God
- Needing to receive forgiveness
- Needing to give forgiveness
- Feeling connected to the loss

## Behavioral & social reactions

Behaviors from an earlier period of development such as:

- bed wetting, thumb sucking, whining, tantrums
- Clinging, need for increased assurances,
- Hoarding food or toys,
- Withdrawing/passivity,
- Aggressive behaviors (hitting, demanding),
- Rebellious/defiant behaviors,
- Hyperactivity/restlessness,
- "Perfect" child,
- Self destructiveness/recklessness,
- Giddiness/joking that does not fit the situation.

## Feelings - emotional reactions

- Numbness
- Sadness
- Anger
- Withdrawal
- Fears/worries
- Anxieties
- Hopelessness
- Self blaming
- Yearning and pining
- Pensive
- Helplessness
- Crying uncontrollably or not at all
- Silliness

Perhaps the

# Can I help children when I am grieving?

Perhaps the child you are caring for is not the only one grieving. Perhaps, you have also suffered a loss. This may be a separation from someone you shared love and life with. Your loss may be the loss of a dream, a friend, of relocation, or changes in your health or income. Your loss may have many dimensions that affect your daily life. It may be a loss that others in your circle of life do not recognize, know about, or support.

Your loss may lower your physical and emotional stamina. You may be tired, sad, lost, impatient or angry. Your child/children's added pleas, clinging, needs or demands for attention and care may exhaust and deplete you.

Sometimes it's not possible to deal with your own loss while providing the care and nurturing your child requires. This is why adults caring for young children sometimes push aside or delay their own grief. Try using the time and energy you do have to enlist support for yourself or for your child. You might seek

out others who will listen, give assistance, or offer support and advice. You may need to ask others to help with daily tasks, such as meal preparation, laundry, or home or auto repairs. You may need others to offer diversions and activities that give you and your child some normal routine.

Even if it is difficult and feels phony, getting help from others may be useful. For your future, and for your child, seeking help may be one of the most important things you do. A caregiving adult may not always be able to be all they wish to be. At those times the caring thing to do is to assure that others will give what you cannot. Suggestions for where you can receive help for children are listed in this booklet. These may also be places to find guidance and support for yourself.

## Some lanterns of hope to light your way

Here are some suggestions we have gathered from our own experiences and from others. We hope they help. It is unlikely all will work for you. It's likely that through your desire to help yourself and others you'll find your own unique ways to grieve and grow.

- **Seek and accept support.** Support comes in many forms—emotional, social and practical support are examples. If you lack support, make finding it your first goal. Start with family, friends, relatives, clergy, or a counselor at a social service or counseling agency.
- **Find models.** You may need evidence that survival and growth are possible. Look for others who can provide this hope. People, support groups or books may help.
- **Learn about adults and grief.** To learn about grief helps you know you're not crazy or depressed. Librarians are often eager and able to help—and the books they suggest may be available without costs.
- **Accept rather than condemn your feelings.** Feelings of grief can be intense and unpredictable. It helps to notice and allow them rather than to judge or bury them. Anger is a feeling many people who are grieving will experience, but most believe there is something wrong with them if they feel or express it. Like barometers, feelings help you recognize the changes taking place within.
- **Take a break from grief.** People often feel guilty if they use distractions to limit their awareness of a loss or to give them a break from the physical, emotional and spiritual upheaval and exhaustion of grief. Taking a grief break doesn't mean you don't care about what has been lost, nor does it mean you are denying your grief. It may mean that you are learning how to adjust to the loss in your own unique way and that you are using valuable coping skills to continue the journey.
- **Make use of rituals of remembrance.** Invent ways to ritualize or symbolize your feelings. Some ideas are lighting candles, listening to music, planting a tree, visiting a gravesite, walking or sitting in a familiar place in nature. Be open to the possibilities that come into your thoughts even if other people are unsure.
- **Pace yourself.** Grief takes energy. You may tire easily. A slower pace alternated with periods of diversion and moderate exercise may assist your mind, body, and spirit.
- **Whenever possible - have fun.** Laughter is good medicine. Seek out funny videos, movies and activities that offer diversion and laughter. Grieving people can and do laugh, and it helps immensely.



*"In all cases, please be patient  
– this can be a special  
journey of growth for  
both you and the child."*

*- Joan Drescher*



# What can I say and do that will help?

*"There are four keys to helping children come to terms with loss; information, emotional expression, tenderness and reminiscing."*

— Charles Smith

To grieve and grow children need life affirming models. The suggestions below provide examples of things you can say and do that can help children grow deep and tall. These suggestions speak to losses of all kinds. If the loss was through death you will find additional help on page eight. When considering these ideas keep in mind the uniqueness of each individual child. Consider each child's age, personality, maturity, cognitive ability and their present and previous experiences with loss.

- **Tell the child about the loss in clear language.**

Young children need help to understand that a loss is real, permanent and irreversible. A child who does not understand that a loss is real cannot grieve the loss. Use simple words. Answer questions as directly as you can. Children often need to be told more than once.

- **Help children learn about loss, grief and death.**

Teaching children about grief helps them learn that their experiences are natural and normal, that loss is a part of life, and that feelings of sadness, anger and helplessness can be faced. Briefly tell, or draw out, some reactions common to grief, or that you are feeling. Let the child know these are normal and that you (or someone else) will help them deal with their feelings in safe ways. Explain about your own or other adults tears, fatigue and irritability at times of grief. Whenever possible make drawings of what you are saying or give children something tangible that they can touch or hold to remember by.

- **Protect a child's need for privacy.**

Especially in public, try not to single a child out with special privileges or attention. He or she needs to feel a part of their peer group.

- **Listen, listen, listen.**

Listen with your eyes, with your ears and with your heart to really hear what the child thinks and feels. Use words that invite more, such as; "Can you tell me more about that," or "What was that like?" or "Is there anything else?" Listen without judgement, not giving solutions or directions on what a child should think or feel. You can offer directions or corrections later.

- **Give attention and positive regard.**

Sometimes there are no words. You cannot fix emotional pain, but you can give comfort by being near and available. Your presence is the gift you give. Lean your body towards, not away from the child. Show him or her you are capable of accepting his/her feelings, including their pain and confusion. Tell the child that you believe in him or her, that you care.

- **Encourage the release of feelings.**

Naming the feelings children are having and helping children locate where they are experiencing these feelings in their bodies helps children gain important life skills. Feelings that are held inside may show

up in physical symptoms. Once feelings are named let the child know the following things: 1) Feelings in themselves are neither good nor bad. 2) Feelings are like barometers— they tell about our internal weather. Feelings tell us about what matters to us—what we want and what we need. 3) Feelings change. They will not always be as they are now. 4) Some feelings are scary and cause us to feel out of control. We can often do things to help feelings change. 5) That there are helpful and hurtful ways to express feelings. Explain how some ways to express feelings (like hitting) hurt people. These ways are to be avoided.

By giving this information you teach children to honor themselves and others. You are teaching how feelings can be used to grieve and grow.

- **Encourage play.**

Play is a natural way children deal with life. Their imagination allows them to face difficult issues, maintain hope and make life understandable. Encourage children in your care to draw and tell stories. Read stories to them that show how animals and people regain hope following a loss.

- **Maintain or assure daily activities and routines.**

Regular activities and home rules help children pace their energy and feel safe. Temper your expectations with kindness and understanding but maintain structure and routine.

- **Provide or encourage opportunities to commemorate and remember.**

Through remembering and commemorating a child learns compassion, that life is valued and how to show caring. By being a part of remembrance activities children learn that they are important members of the family and community. Making a memory book or a memory box, planting a tree or writing a letter to the parents of a friend who has died are examples of commemoration.

- **Touch helps.**

Feelings of isolation can be transformed through physical contact or touch. Be sensitive not to violate the child's level of comfort with touch. If a child is uncomfortable with affectionate touch try wrestling and other contact sports or games that incorporate physical contact.

# How do you talk to children about death?

*"What are the magic words? How do you explain death to children?" I asked my father. Taking me gently by the shoulder, as he had when I was a child, he explained that there are no 'magic words,' only the 'magic way' of Love; a way that I would have to search out myself with each child, for no two would be exactly alike."*

– Bruce Conley

Children need caring adults to accept and name their losses and to provide them with information in a manner that matches their ability to understand. When considering these ideas remember to mold them to each individual child. Factors to consider are age in years, maturity, personality, cognitive ability, past experiences with loss and death and the religious and social beliefs that surround the child.

Children gain life skills by being included in life events, even painful events such as the death of a loved one. Children gain competency by observing, through play, and by being involved. Children need to be involved to the extent that they choose and to be given flexible, open-ended choices. Children can usually be counted on to limit their involvement to fit their tolerance for dealing with situations and emotions.

## Guidelines for discussing the death of a loved one with children

- 1. In clear words tell that the death has happened.** Be specific and literal. Use factual information to explain what death means. This is important for young children who may not understand that death is permanent and irreversible. An example: "When someone dies it means their body can no longer work. Their heart stops working and they don't breathe anymore. They don't have to eat or sleep and they no longer see anything or get hungry. They are never too cold or too hot. Nothing hurts them because they no longer feel anything at all. They don't need their body anymore."
- 2. Tell how the death happened.** Briefly tell where and how the death happened and what the cause of death was.
- 3. Reassure children that a wide range of reactions is acceptable and normal.** All feelings are normal. Feelings about death often seem strange, confusing, intense or mixed-up. People can feel sick, sad, silly, mad or bad. Describe common thoughts and physical reactions. Encourage children to express their thoughts and feelings through words, drawings, and where possible, safe physical release. Let children know that adults have these thoughts and feelings also and that people who are grieving the same loss often react very differently.
- 4. Explain that sometimes people don't feel much at all.** Sometimes when a death happens our bodies feel numb. Even if adults around you are showing a lot of feelings it's OK if you don't feel the same way. Everyone is different.
- 5. Tell where the body has been taken, and what will be done with the body.** Tell briefly about funeral customs, wakes and visitations.
- 6. Give information about who will provide care and intimacy.** Tell children who will answer their questions, provide them with love, meals, emotional support, play time and daily care. Check to see that children know who the person(s) are that will be present for them and that they feel comfortable with this person(s).
- 7. Share that life has meaning and will not be forgotten.** Let children know that life has value and that the person who has died will be remembered. Share what opportunities there will be to honor and remember the person who has died. Ask for suggestions.
- 8. Tell how they can be involved in remembrance or burial ceremonies.** Briefly explain what services or ceremonies there will be and how the child can participate if they wish. Explain what to expect when they view the body. This is a time when words may lack meaning, but hugs, hand-shakes and sharing memories can help a lot.
- 9. Give ongoing information as requested and repeat the information above.** Children learn by repetition; be prepared to repeat information or answer questions to clarify understanding.
- 10. Empower children with choice and control.** As much as possible involve children in decision making. Ask them about the level of involvement they wish to have. Since they may change their minds ask more than once.
- 11. Recognize and support a child's need for both solitude and support.** Children should not be coerced to talk about death or to participate in burial practices. At times their ability to create distance and maintain hope is effective coping.

# Are there special concerns that grieving children face?

While we cannot always keep children from hurting, we may be able to keep them from hurting for the wrong reasons. Begin by recognizing and addressing a child's vulnerabilities.

## The vulnerable situation...

1. The entire family may have changed. Children may experience the disruption of predictability caretaking and secure day-to-day life.
2. Caregivers may lack understanding of how a child's developmental abilities affect their capacity to understand and effectively cope with the loss.
3. Discrepancies between how children and adults understand loss, grief and death may cause caregivers to think a child does not care or is not affected.
4. Children are often given inadequate information and are unable to understand the reality and permanence of a loss. They may feel left out, lost, unimportant or dislocated.
5. Popular ideas about grief may imply that grief is a short, predictable, time-limited process. Children may lack the guidance to remember a loss and to integrate the meaning and reality of the loss into various life passages and developmental phases.
6. Children may distort, change or sacrifice their own needs to protect a parent's or caregiver's emotional needs, or to match what they think adults want them to feel or do.

## ...What you can do:

1. Re-establish (or maintain) family routines, rules and rituals, such as shared mealtimes, holiday ceremonies and family gatherings and vacations.
2. From mental health professionals, school counselors, physicians, or through books, obtain information regarding developmental abilities of children.
3. Increase your awareness and understanding of the differences and similarities of how children and adults grieve. Practice patience and benevolence with grieving children in your care. See page 5 of this booklet.
4. Provide clear information to children about what has happened. Repeat the information as often as needed. Check by asking the child to say back in their own words what he or she has heard.
5. Recognize that grief is a process that occurs across a lifetime. Let children know that it is normal to re-experience a loss, especially at important passages in their lives. Encourage the use of photo albums, memory books and times to tell stories and remember.
6. Let children in your care know where you turn for help and what you do to care for yourself. Explain to them that you don't expect them to grieve as you do. Use praise to reinforce their uniqueness.



# Are there special concerns that grieving children face?

While we cannot always keep children from hurting, we may be able to keep them from hurting for the wrong reasons. Begin by recognizing and addressing a child's vulnerabilities.

## The vulnerable situation...

7. Children's grief is often discredited or discounted. Adults may fail to realize a child is grieving.
8. Adults may lack tolerance or understanding of how children grieve and may label and judge their actions or their feelings.
9. The cultural emphasis on saying good-bye and getting over a loss challenge the connections and continuity children naturally maintain through thoughts, fantasies and dreams.
10. Children who lack ways of understanding the loss are unable to process their grief and integrate their loss.
11. Children whose imaginative or expressive capacities are not well developed may need help to use their imaginations to envision their future or to protect themselves from their fears.
12. Multiple losses, especially those which occur in a short period of time may overwhelm the child and cause complications. Unaddressed earlier losses may unexpectedly surface at later times.
13. A child who is a sole sibling survivor in a family may lack continuity and someone to validate and make real their past experiences.
14. When a loss is ambiguous or conflicted, like a missing parent or the death of someone a child both loved and feared, it is difficult to grieve.

## ...What you can do:

7. Read about and attend workshops about children and grief. Recognize common losses of childhood and ways that youth sometimes express grief.
8. Provide or assure adult care that listens, guides and responds to behaviors, feeling or physical complaints in non-judgemental ways.
9. Validate the naturalness of ongoing relationships. Remember and honor the loss at significant times in a child's life. Understand that maintaining connections assists development.
10. Be aware that losses may not be realized when they happen but may surface to be grieved in later years.
11. Encourage and monitor children's play to learn their concerns and how they are being expressed. Make use of play therapy. Make use of repetitious comforting, including touch and art projects.
12. Talk with the child about earlier losses to understand what meaning and trauma they may hold. Have a specialist talk to the child to identify concerns and to assist you with developing a support plan.
13. Recognize that the child may feel lonely and abandoned. Make times for the family's history to be told. Recognize the potential for survivor guilt.
14. Provide opportunities and acceptance for a child to realize and express mixed feelings about the loss across time. Validate experiences.

# What helps children bounce back?

The past years have brought exciting research into human resiliency—the ability to bounce back from trauma and loss. Below are 12 characteristics and practices that have been found to be part of hearty, resilient personalities. Some children naturally display characteristics of resiliency, others need guidance and encouragement. These traits are life skills that can be learned. As we encourage and model these skills we are helping children foster their own growth—not for a day, but for a lifetime.

**1. Hopefulness.** Those with an enduring belief in the attainability of fervent wishes develop life stories that exude optimism and hope rather than mistrust and resignation. A generalized expectation that good outcomes are often possible has positive effects when coping with illness and loss.

**2. Awareness.** Self-awareness is the ability to recognize needs, emotions, personal wishes, abilities, and beliefs without censoring them. Self-awareness is the opposite of self-deception.

**3. Self acceptance.** Self-acceptance is the willingness and ability to acknowledge and experience—rather than to disown—whatever feelings emerge from any particular moment or event. This is not to say that feelings rule a person, or are expressed in all social or interpersonal situations. Self-acceptance is the ability to be an ally with the self. This includes being able to examine personal weaknesses and accept feedback from others. Self-acceptance lets us recognize and legitimize the importance of a loss.

**4. Intact personal boundaries.** Children with intact personal boundaries can recognize and act on their unique need for personal autonomy— independence of thought and action. They can also rely on others when it is helpful to do so.

**5. Assertiveness.** Assertiveness is the expression of one's needs and feelings through words and action. This is the way a person honors their needs, boundaries, judgments and values. Being assertive does not trample on the rights and needs of others. A person can be self-assertive and decide to put another person's needs ahead of their own. The hallmark of being assertive is to have and exercise personal choice.

**6. Congeniality.** Congenial children welcome others as interesting, as valuable, and as friends. They develop social networks which are likely to provide an abundance of practical and emotional support during critical periods of loss.

**7. Active imagination.** The willingness and ability to dream, the openness and receptivity to new ideas and possibilities enhance our ability to solve problems and discover or construct meaning.

**8. Rituals that honor and remember.** Commemorations are a way to honor life. Remembrance rituals are conscious, deliberate, actions that tangibly or symbolically recognize the value and meaning of a loss. These include personal ceremonies and observances as well as public ceremonies.

**9. Affinity – connection.** Some focus, relationship or commitment that gives a connection or kinship to someone or something beyond the self. Persons who feel a part of a greater meaning and purpose can develop a sense of belonging.

**10. Forgiveness.** Forgiveness implies the ability to accommodate to the imperfection of oneself and of others. To forgive is not to release someone from responsibility, but to relieve them of judgement and blame.

**11. Remembering.** Intentional acts of remembering what was rather than forgetting or disconnecting from the past.

**12. A unity cycle of life.** A child who is able to weave connections between the past, present and future across the life span learns that life is a never-ending story, in which new awarenesses and possibilities can and do develop over time.

## To grieve is to affirm life

Sometimes people think that if only they can get over their grief, or forget the past, they will be successful. Grief is a natural response to a loss. It cannot be gotten over. Forgetting doesn't make grief go away.

When a loss happens and is recognized, it is either experienced or is placed out of awareness and is buried. Either way grief takes energy. Grief that is buried is buried alive, not dead. Losses that are buried can rob persons—regardless of their age—of vitality and contribute to patterns of isolation, sadness, uncertainty, and physical and spiritual stress. To bury a loss is to build a barrier to life—a wall of forgetfulness.

To experience one's grief is to affirm and honor life. Grief gradually puts together the pieces of life that circumstances broke apart. When we grieve we re-member ourselves, our dreams, and others; we reweave the torn fabric. Through grief we find our connections, realize what matter most, find strength and resilience. Grief builds bridges rather than walls.



*“Mourning is not meant to separate the mourner from what has been lost—as if it were a river of forgetfulness. Rather, mourning makes use of remembrance to manifest and affirm the experience of continuity.”*

– Mark Kaminsky