



FUNERALS IN THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC

A TOOLKIT FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

GOOD GRIEF

Good Grief provides direct support to grieving children and youth, educates communities, and advocates on behalf of the bereaved. For more, visit: WWW.GOOD-GRIEF.ORG

OVERVIEW

Funerals are human activities. Funerals are our expression of grief and a transition into an unknown future without someone we love. Funerals may be most important to children because these rituals help them understand that someone is gone and what it means to be dead. During a pandemic, when large groups cannot gather or move freely or easily, funerals may need reconsideration. While seeing (or witnessing) the dead has significant value for many, this may not be possible for every family given the circumstances of the present moment. In order to reconsider what a funeral is and can be during a pandemic, we can look to its foundational elements. If a public funeral is not possible for a loved one, or if an entire family cannot gather, that does not mean a funeral cannot occur once, twice, or multiple times in multiple locations. This is a brief guide to ensure that you and the children in your lives have the opportunity to mourn.

Remember, funerals are rituals that help us express our pain, memories, and gratitude. Funerals are the commencement of your life without a special person.



Love
Never
Dies

Grieving children need supportive relationships, but as time goes on, the impact of grief and loss intensifies as support wanes.



**A FUNERAL BRINGS THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER
AND BUILDS SUPPORT FOR TODAY AND THE FUTURE.**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to find creative ways to build resilience until we can gather together as a family and community.



FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS OF FUNERALS



RITUALS

Funerals are rituals that have a start, middle, and end. These rituals can begin with opening words, a poem, a song, or the lighting of a candle. Funerals often involve movement, like walking into a room, ringing a bell, or lifting your arm to make a toast. If you cannot be present at a funeral, you can create a funeral ritual that has some or all of the elements listed below (**a sample structure can be found on page 6**). If there are other people with you, consider asking the group to identify which components of the ritual they would like to prepare. It is always

helpful and good to empower children to have a role in rituals. Funerals help us learn and process that someone is gone. Rituals can also deepen a sense of connection with both the person who died, our grief, and those joining in the ritual. If you are alone, of course you can do every part yourself, or you might consider finding videos on the internet, like that of your favorite poet reading a poem so you can just listen to the words.



MUSIC

Whether it is live music or the creation of a playlist, music helps set the tone for a ritual. Music tells a story, and can tell the story of the person who died, the generation they grew up in, the tunes they loved, or lyrics that represent their life. Music can also help us express how we are feeling at this moment. Create a playlist that helps you create an atmosphere, tell a story, or express yourself. **Listen to episode 4 on Vennly for more.**



MEMORIES

The sharing of memories can enhance a ritual. If you have some family with you, create a space for people to share freely. Leaving time for silence often leads to more people sharing, and sharing more deeply. If you are alone, take time to journal or sit quietly in reflection. Not all memories are happy. Know that it is okay to have honest memories by remembering good times and not so good times. Reflecting on lessons learned from a person's life and naming them out loud can be helpful. **Listen to episode 5 on Vennly for more.**



EXPRESSION

Grief and mourning go hand-and-hand. Mourning is the outward expression of your grief. An activity that helps you or your child(ren) express grief will likely be cathartic. Making a card, decorating a memory box, doing an activity that is representative of the person who died, creating a collage, or using symbolism to help you express your grief is called mourning. When we lose those we love, we need to mourn in healthy ways in order to grieve in healthy ways.



PROCESSING

Funerals help us process that someone has died and is not returning. Children need facts about what it means to be dead. Help a child to differentiate between living objects, inanimate objects, and living beings that have died (**see activity on page 21**). The leaves on the tree are alive, but those on the ground have died. Why? (**see tip sheet on pages 13 & 14**). A funeral that includes the person who died is helpful because it assists

children and adults alike in intellectually processing that someone is gone. When circumstances require the absence of a person at their own funeral, it can be useful to bury an object or memento, which might include something you created during this ritual. The activity you complete during the ritual might also be something you want to bring to a grave at a later date or put alongside an urn. When living beings die, they return to the earth in one form or another. It can be helpful to symbolically bury an object, such as a letter, as a part of your mourning. **Listen to episode 3 on Vennly for more.**



GRATITUDE

Gratitude is often expressed in funerals via eulogies, prayer, and song. What are you grateful for as a result of your relationship with the person? Consider creating a gratitude journal to help you keep track of gratitude that emerges during your grief. The funeral can be the first journal entry. If several members of your family can gather, consider preparing remarks ahead of time to share with each other. **Listen to episode 7 on Vennly for more.**



KIDS ACTIVITES

1. Decorate a rock to bring to a grave at a later date
2. Make a card or write a letter
3. Create a memory box
4. Make [origami flowers](#)
5. Decorate a picture frame
6. Complete an activity for kids to understand death (**see page 21**)
7. Show and share (**see page 22**)
8. Identify tokens of remembrance (**see page 23**)
9. Gather Memories (**see page 24**)

SAMPLE RITUAL FOR A MEMORIAL AT HOME

1. **MUSIC** Play an opening song
2. **CANDLE CEREMONY** Light a candle and sit in silence for a few minutes
3. **READING** Read a poem or listen to someone reading it online
4. **ACTIVITY** Do an activity you and your family selected
5. **MUSIC** Play a song
6. **SHARING** Share memories, feelings, and reflections
7. **GRATITUDE** Write in a gratitude journal or share words of thanks
8. **RITUAL** Place an object or memento, like a letter to the person who died, in the earth
9. **MUSIC** Play a closing song

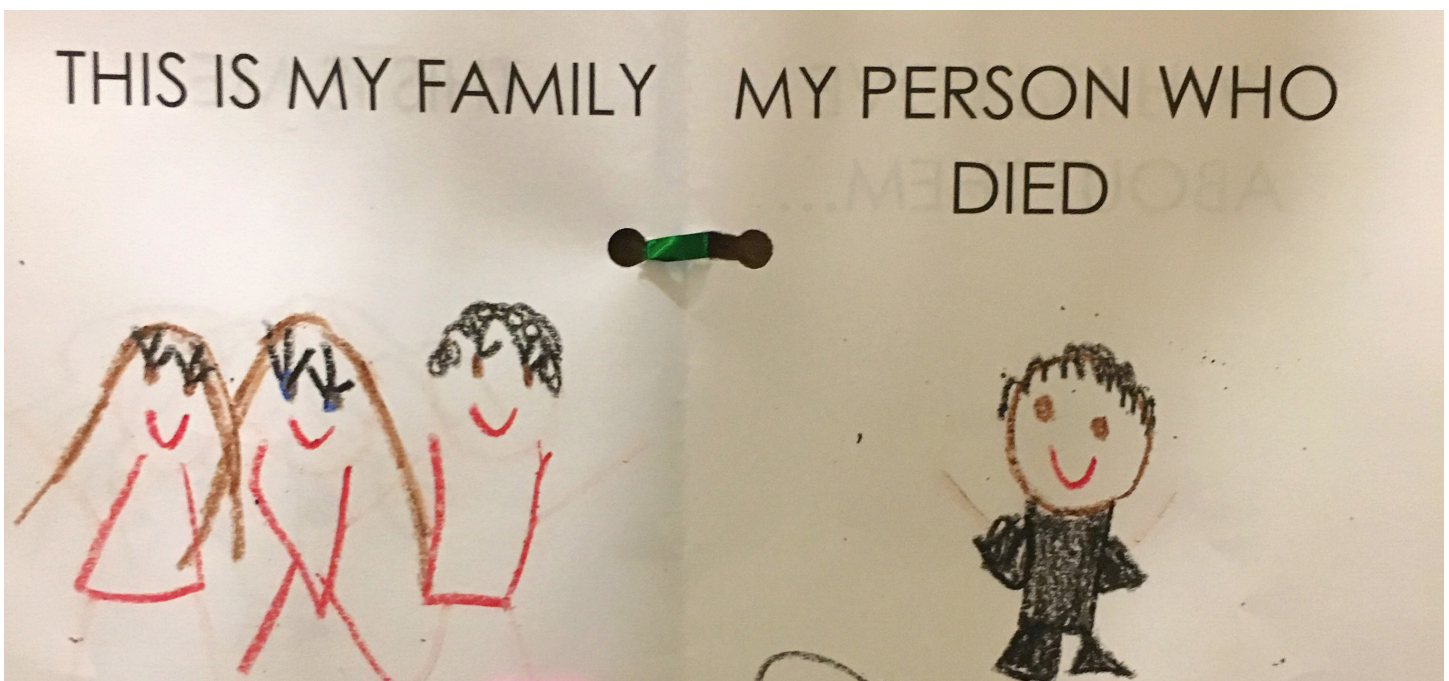


TIPS FOR PLANNING A MEMORIAL AT HOME

1. **ASK** others how they would like to contribute
 - Invite those who will be with you to write some remarks
 - Invite those who cannot be with you to email or send their thoughts which you can read aloud
2. **CONSIDER** inviting someone to join you via Skype or Facetime
3. **PREPARE** any children in the household
 - Honestly tell them:
 - a. What you will do
 - b. Why will you do it
 - c. What it means to be dead
4. **PLAN** the ritual by identifying each part and who is responsible for what first
5. **ASSEMBLE** videos or songs you want to play
6. **SET-UP** the space where you will do the ritual
 - Remove distractions
7. **REMEMBER**, creating a funeral is not about it being perfect, but it is about the ritual being an authentic mourning experience for you and anyone who can join you.

CHECKLIST FOR PLANNING A MEMORIAL RITUAL AT HOME

- ☐ IDENTIFY ANYONE WHO WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE RITUAL
 - Will you use video to include others?
- ☐ CREATE A PLAYLIST
- ☐ IDENTIFY 1-2 READINGS
 - Poetry
 - Excerpt from a book
 - Sacred text
- ☐ IDENTIFY AN ACTIVITY
 - You can do this as a small group or by yourself
- ☐ ASK PARTICIPANTS TO REFLECT ON WORDS THEY WANT TO SHARE
 - Memories
 - Words of gratitude
- ☐ ASSIGN TASKS TO PARTICIPANTS
- ☐ GATHER OBJECTS AND MATERIALS FOR YOUR RITUAL
 - Candle
 - Picture
 - Supplies for any group or individual activities
- ☐ CREATE AN ORDER (PROGRAM) FOR YOUR RITUAL
 - What comes first, second, and third etc.?
- ☐ BE KIND TO YOURSELF. THIS IS NOT ABOUT PERFECTION



Good Grief is proud to partner with [Vennly](#) to host nine podcasts on creating rituals when you or your family cannot gather for a funeral as a result of COVID-19 and social distancing. Please listen to the collection of nine perspectives on Vennly as a companion resource.

[Vennly](#) is a spiritual care app where top spiritual and community leaders across faith traditions, cultural backgrounds, and identities contribute original audio Perspectives on topics like grief, stress, and identity. You can access great content, including more on grief, for free for the next 30 days by downloading the app and using the promo code: *griefisgood*.

INTRO: Funerals in the Time of a Pandemic

EPISODE 1: The Foundations of a Funeral and Why They Matter

EPISODE 2: How to Create a Funeral Ritual

EPISODE 3: Mourning is Doing

EPISODE 4: The Role of Music

EPISODE 5: Memories... The Good and Bad

EPISODE 6: Grief is an Intellectual Process

EPISODE 7: Naming Gratitude for a Life Lived

EPISODE 8: The Logistics of a Funeral Ritual

EPISODE 9: A Message to Kids

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT

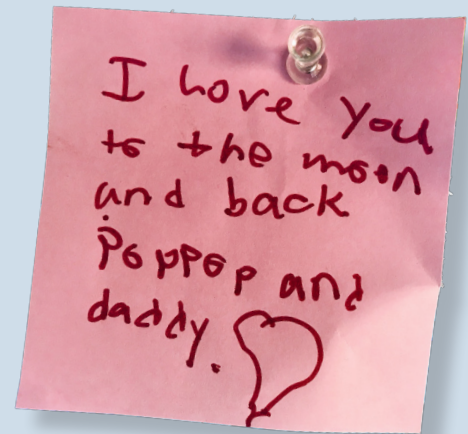
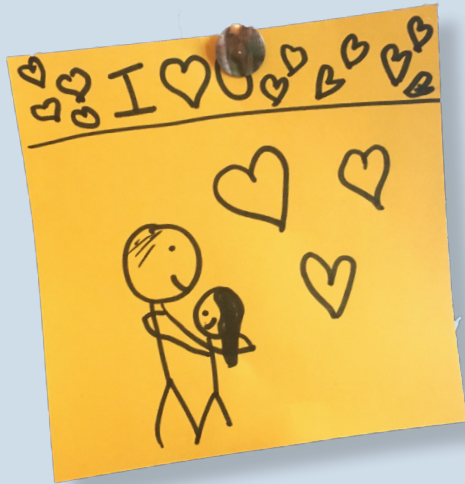
Grief is not just an **emotional** response. Grief is full of competing, heavy, confusing, conflicting, and indescribable feelings, but it is also a physical, spiritual, and intellectual response to losing someone you love. Grief is love turned upside down. Kids struggle with articulating the scary feelings that accompany death. When they cannot find words to express their feelings children often have **physical** responses, like headaches and bellyaches. They struggle concentrating in school.

Grief is also a **spiritual** experience as a child wrestles with how and why this bad thing happened. Religion may serve a role here or it may not depending on the family. Nonetheless, the question of "why this happened" can be strong and overwhelming. Funerals can provide the opportunity for this questioning, meaning-making, and filling in the answers to their questions.

“Grief is the other side of love.”

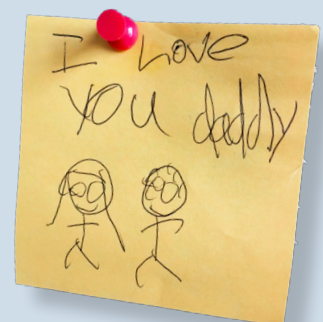
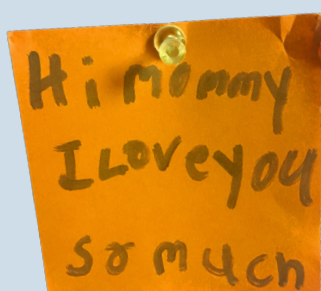
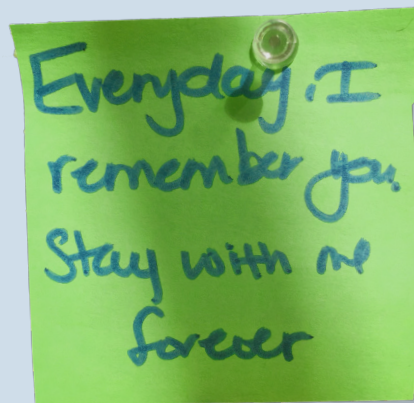
And, lastly, grief is an **intellectual** experience. Kids need to understand what it means to be dead. Honesty and truth are required. No lies, not even fibs, are helpful. Facts, honesty, clear language (not metaphors) and other points of reference (past experiences with death such as pet loss, movies which engage death, etc.) are all critical to understanding someone is dead and not returning. Without this knowledge, kids will grieve with false information and then need to re-grieve once they discover the truth. **(see tip sheet on pages 13 & 14)**

In order to be most effective at supporting a child in these four areas, consider a tone and approach that does not assume what this experience is like for the child. Start from ground zero and with an inquisitive spirit. From the beginning, try to understand what this person meant to the child. Discover what the child liked to do with the person. Identify favorite memories or commonly told stories. Treat the child normally and allow him/her to be comfortable and inquisitive. **(see tip sheet on pages 15 & 16)**



GRIEF IS A NORMAL AND NATURAL REACTION TO DEATH.

Love and grief are inseparable - they are yin and yang - so when we lose those we love we experience grief. Grief is a normal response and has been a part of the human condition since the beginning of time.



GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT CHILDREN AND FUNERALS

Sometimes we forget how powerful culture is at influencing children and youth's ideas and perceptions. This is a generation with access to a lot of information from videos, social media, and Google searches. Try to be mindful that the child in front of you was forged within a culture and community which will influence their perception and reactions to the funeral. Despite the many influencers on a child's grief, such as family, culture, community, religion, ethnicity, etc., they will need many internal tools to navigate this experience. Those internal tools are what we want to develop and lean on.

A child's resilience and ability to cope will rely on the extent to which a child is:

- ♥ empowered to explore
- ♥ allowed to ask questions
- ♥ permitted to touch
- ♥ able to share openly
- ♥ able to feel that they matter
- ♥ affirmed their feelings
- ♥ included

MISINFORMATION

Unfortunately, our culture is afraid to engage grief. We tend to label grief as something bad because grief is hard and scary. As a result, the majority of people do not have a language for talking effectively about emotions or their mortality. Folklore, myths, stereotypes, and misinformation have consumed our culture. Children and youth are the victims of this misinformation.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

How a child understands and responds to death depends on their developmental stages. While one cannot say that all 5-year-olds will respond the same, one can anticipate some generalities. Most 3-year-olds are concrete thinkers and do not understand the finality of death; whereas, most 11-year-olds are fascinated by the details (sometimes grisly stuff) of the death. These are all normal reactions, even if they make adults uncomfortable. How you interact with a teen is not the same as an elementary school kid, though the needs are generally similar. **(see tip sheet on page 19)**

“Funerals are not adult activities.
They are *human* activities.”

- Joe Primo, Good Grief CEO





BE CREATIVE. INSPIRE.

In order to provide children and youth and families with a positive experience that meets their needs, creativity and openness are critical. They are also at the heart of showing you care. No one can do this like you, if you are well-informed and prepared. While this may feel different or even uncomfortable, it is important to consider rituals, i.e. mourning, that are not “traditional” or common. You may be wonderfully surprised and inspired by how a child approaches death and ritual when given tools and permission.

ANTICIPATING QUESTIONS

Many adults make decisions from a place of fear rather than how to best meet the needs of children and youth. Because many adults are fearful of death they make assumptions about what kids need. Adults are concerned that exposing children to death or being honest will traumatize them. Fear makes grief harder and worse for kids. Protection is not one of their needs.

Some of the questions you should anticipate include:

- How do I tell my children and youth?
- Is my child going to be traumatized?
- Should my child attend the funeral?
- How do I explain death to my child?
- My in-laws do not think the children and youth should participate. What do I do?
- I do not think my child can handle this. What do you think?

What are your answers to these questions? Write them down and then see our suggested answers and considerations on page 25.

TIPS SHEETS





TIPS FOR TEACHING KIDS ABOUT DEATH

Death is a part of life. Kids know more about it than you might think. Talking openly about death does not negatively impact a child. Rather, it provides opportunities to share, explore, learn, and understand this normal part of the human condition. Teaching children about death gives them the tools they need to navigate the subject when it comes up at school, on TV, on social media, or elsewhere, and prepares them for when a death inevitably happens in their life.

1. TALK ABOUT IT BIOLOGICALLY

Death can be boiled down to biology. It is not a metaphor, cliché, or abstract concept. Explaining death needs a foundation in biology. All living things will die. So, start with describing what makes us alive.

1. Ask a child: what do living things do in order to stay alive?

- | | |
|-----------|----------------------|
| a. Eat | f. Tweet |
| b. Drink | g. Burp |
| c. Sleep | h. Stay warm |
| d. Shower | i. Brush teeth, etc. |
| e. Text | |

2. Tell the child that when we die we no longer need to:

- | | |
|-----------|----------------------|
| a. Eat | f. Tweet |
| b. Drink | g. Burp |
| c. Sleep | h. Stay warm |
| d. Shower | i. Brush teeth, etc. |
| e. Text | |

2. TALK ABOUT DEATH IN MECHANICAL TERMS

Young children, in particular, are very mechanical in their processing. Think about their toys. They learn that a cube won't fit into the circle-shaped hole. They learn to piece puzzles together. So, provide a similar context when talking about death:

- Tell the child to put their hand on their heart.
- Ask them what they feel.
(Thump, thump, thump of the heart)
- Ask them to take a deep breath, and then another.



TIPS FOR TEACHING KIDS ABOUT DEATH

- d. Tell them that the heart and lungs are teammates. They work with other organs like our brain where we think, and our belly that we feed (provide other organ descriptors as needed).
- e. When one of these organs stops working properly or breaks, then the organs are no longer able to work together.
- f. Every organ is important and we need all of them to work in order to stay alive.
Example: Mommy's heart stopped working because she had something called a heart attack. Because mommy's heart no longer works none of her others organs can do their job. So, she died.

3. LOOK TO THE CYCLE OF LIFE IN NATURE

Nature is an easy and accessible tool for teaching children about death. Depending on their age, they have seen flowers bloom, trees grow and shed their leaves, the change of seasons, and ants get squashed. While using nature to discuss death doesn't effectively address the emotional counterpart of the death of a loved one, it is a strong foundation for helping a child understand that living things die.

4. UTILIZE LIFE EVENTS

Life is fertile with opportunities to talk about, normalize, and explore death. When a gold fish dies, use it as a learning opportunity. The same is true for any pet. When children hear about death in the news of a celebrity or a public tragedy, don't sweep it under the rug and pretend like it didn't happen. Death and grief are a part of life. If we help children understand and process this fundamental fact, it won't ruin their childhood, make them lose their innocence, or cause damage. Instead, it provides an opportunity to learn, explore, discover, ask, and develop coping skills before someone they know dies. Talking about the dead deer on the side of the road helps a child to be healthier, better informed, and better prepared.

5. ASK WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW

Children are exposed to death all the time. Disney loves to produce movies with orphans like Cinderella, The Lion King, The Little Mermaid, Bambi, and others. Many superheroes lost a parent, including Spiderman, Batman, and many more. The concept of dead people is not new to children. Unfortunately, adults seldom talk about it or engage it in meaningful or productive way with kids. Ask a child what they think about death, what they know, and what they've heard. And then be prepared to answer honestly without clichés or abstract metaphors. Concrete and honest facts are best for children.



HOW TO TELL A CHILD SOMEONE DIED

For many, it can be an incredible burden to be the one to tell a child that someone important to them has died. Most adults struggle with talking about death, so when it comes time to talk about death with a child we can often feel helpless. What should I say? What is appropriate and inappropriate? Even though it is hard to share bad news, there are simple ways to start the conversation.

Telling a child someone has died starts with a commitment to honesty. Honesty is important. In order to be honest, enter the conversation without expectations about how they will react to the news. Some kids may respond with fear, while others may seem indifferent. There are no “right and wrong,” or “good and bad” reactions.

How you tell a child that someone died depends on context, nature of the relationship, and timing. For example, if a teacher or student died over the weekend, it will be helpful to have a conversation about the death in advance of school on Monday. News of this nature spreads incredibly quickly, and it is important that the child knows the truth before classmates and others in the community begin sharing their own story and interpretation of the death.

Remember that there will be aspects of this situation that you can and cannot control. You can play an important role in how children hear about and come to understand the death. We can best support our children by having an open dialogue that helps build understanding and an opportunity to express themselves.

BELOW IS A SCRIPT YOU MIGHT TRY IF A TEACHER OR ADULT IN THEIR LIFE DIES:

1. Adult: So, Alexis, have you heard about what happened with Mrs. Scott?

Don't assume Alexis doesn't already know. She may have picked it up already from a friend on social media etc.

2. Adult: I just learned that Mrs. Scott died.

WAIT to see how the child responds.

3. Adult: I think a lot of your friends and teachers will be talking about it this week in school. I would like us to talk about it too.

Allow yourself to be spontaneous with the conversation. Here are some things you should know about typical reactions:

- Each child responds differently.
- Children may have an increased sense of fear for their safety and yours.
- Children may be afraid to return to school.
- Children process information in fragments. They may take it in and then quickly move onto something else.
- Children may just want to be with their friends.
- Children usually have lots of questions; It will be important to answer them at an age-appropriate level.



HOW TO TELL A CHILD SOMEONE DIED

4. Adult: This is really [insert emotion such as sad, disappointing, etc.].

Wait to see if the child has ideas of her own.

5. Adult: Assure the child that they can talk openly about the death and their feelings with you. Identify other people they can also talk with at school or in their life. Communicate your love and allow them to explore their reactions. Often, reassurance and love are the most meaningful things we can do for our children.

HERE ARE THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN TELLING A CHILD THAT A PARENT, SIBLING, OR LOVED ONE DIED:

HONESTY Kids need to know the truth. Don't lie or distort the facts. However, you don't have to provide all the facts at once. Start with a few facts and give more as they ask for them so you don't overwhelm with information.

SAFETY Kids need to know that their needs are going to be met and that you will be there for them.

DON'T MAKE FALSE PROMISES You can't promise that you will not die. Instead, ensure their safety.

PREPARATION Don't arrive at a funeral without telling a child what they'll see and what to expect. Prepare a child for what they might see, feel, or hear in the coming days.

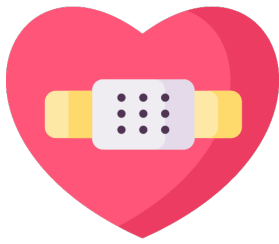
INCLUSION Do not exclude children. Empower them to make decisions about their participation in rituals and give opportunities for them to feel like they can contribute.

GIVE SPACE A child may need to go outside and play, be by herself, or go be with friends.

NO EXPECTATIONS A child may seem indifferent or provide another surprising response. That's okay. It's just how some kids digest difficult information, especially if they don't understand the finality or enormity of what has happened.

STAY AWAY FROM CLICHÉS AND ABSTRACT IDEAS While there is, of course, a place for religion in this process, employing it here is not the place for it. Religious ideas are often abstract and confusing to a child and don't ultimately help them understand what "death" means. If you say, "Mommy has gone to heaven" a child will likely be confused and wonder when she will come back, how to get to heaven to see Mommy, or think God is selfish for taking Mommy away.

This can be a very overwhelming time. It's not about getting it perfect, but being informed and staying consistently honest. There is time to clarify and try again if the first time didn't go as you had hoped. There are many conversations ahead...



TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH GRIEVING KIDS

1. LISTEN, TRULY LISTEN

Talking is not always helpful; listening is. Silence can invite more sharing. Advice or comments are not always necessary; often the child just needs to be heard. Actively listen by repeating what you hear them say to ensure you are understanding them correctly by using phrases like “I hear you” and “Tell me more.” Let them know you heard them, for example, “Wow, it sounds like you had a really tough day at school.”

2. BE PRESENT

Life is busy and distracting, so being present is harder than it sounds. When your children are talking, especially about their concerns, pay attention and be present with your eyes, ears, and your full self. A child once said, “I want my mom’s undivided attention, you know, not thinking about 50 other things at once.” Try to stay tuned in to them.

3. POSE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

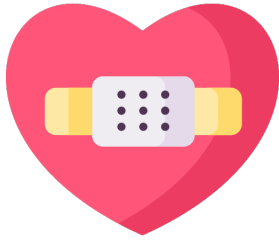
To encourage more sharing, avoid asking questions that have yes, no, or other single word answers. For example, a good alternative to “How was your day?” is “Tell me one good thing that happened today.” Give them time to respond. While who, what, when, and where questions show your interest in your child, try not to be intrusive or take over the conversation. Instead, stay gently curious, such as “What is that like for you?” or “What else happened?”

4. FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Instead of asking your children specific questions that you want answered, let them take the lead in the conversation. Pick up on what they are saying and engage with them in what they want to talk about. Name and validate the child’s feelings by reflecting back the feeling they are expressing, such as “Sounds like you felt really lonely.” We can’t fix or take away their pain, but we can validate their painful feelings. And if they don’t want to talk, that’s okay too.

5. BE AUTHENTIC

It’s okay to show and to respond to your child with real emotion. Model for them by sharing how you are feeling, for example, “I feel really sad too, especially when I hear that song.” Such expressions can be helpful in showing children that strong emotions can co-exist with the ability to keep on living. Genuine responses usually make children want to share more.



TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH GRIEVING KIDS

6. LISTEN AND TALK DURING THE “IN-BETWEEN” TIMES

Sometimes great conversations happen during the “in-betweens” of life, like driving, walking, doing an activity together, or at bed time because of the parallel position; the parent and child aren’t looking each other right in the eye. Talking side-by-side with your child can create a strong connection.

7. HONESTY MATTERS

Children are better at handling the truth of a situation than we might think. When we tell children the truth in simple, developmentally appropriate language, we build trust and model for them that they too can be honest with us. Being honest also can mean sharing that you do not have all of the answers, and that is okay. If we want children to develop good coping skills, it starts with knowing the truth about a situation.

8. TAKE TIME TO SHARE

Busy families often lack the time to sit and talk with each other, so create conversation times and rituals, which might include an activity like playing a board game. By having a set time that works for you - either daily, weekly, or monthly - it creates a culture and a safe time for sharing. Adults can initiate sharing too by talking about themselves, rather than just questioning. This often triggers ideas for children to share about themselves.

9. MAKE CONVERSATIONS PLACES OF COMFORT

When your children talk with you, you want them to feel heard, and perhaps relieved, inspired, or recharged, rather than guilty or a source of disappointment to you. Ask what they may want or need from you, such as advice, help solving a problem, or simply listening. Offer your ear as well as words of encouragement and soften strong reactions like anger or frustration.

10. BE SPONTANEOUS!

Do the unexpected and mix things up, like doing homework in the park or watching a movie together on a school night. These unexpected shared opportunities can generate fun, a sense of connection that is the basis for more talking and sharing, and create new memories.

REMEMBER...

Communication is difficult, and no one is perfect. These 10 tips are just suggestions, not absolute “must dos.” Find what works for your child, for you, and for your routines. And if a child chooses not to talk, simply respect that and let them know that you are always available to them.



GRIEF IN DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

AGES	LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING	REACTIVE BEHAVIORS	NEEDS
2 AND UNDER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can sense that something is different at home. • Does not yet understand what death is. • Probably won't remember the person who died. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fussiness • Clinging to adults • Regressive behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-verbal care (such as hugs and rocking) • Stable routine
2 – 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees death as temporary – believes person will return. Don't fear death, but fear separation. • Usually can't comprehend the concepts of heaven, afterlife or soul. • Feels sadness, but often periods of grief are interspersed with normal playing behavior. • Substitutes attachment from the deceased person to another person. • May not remember the person who died. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regression (bed wetting, thumb sucking) • Fear of separation • Nightmares • Aggression • Non-compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable daily routine • Structure • Honesty, use the words "dead" and "died" • Answer to questions honestly but simply • Love • Reassurance • To be heard, so listen
6 – 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to understand that death is permanent. • Develops fear of death and of others dying. • May feel guilt and blame self for death; see it as punishment for bad behavior. • Magical thinking; may see self as cause of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief ebbs and flows • Compulsive care giving • Aggression • Possessiveness (e.g. of remaining parent) • Regression • Somatic complaints • School phobia • Exaggerated fears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways to express their feelings (art, writing, etc.) • Concrete answers to questions • Validation of feelings • Love • Reassurance that they are not to blame • To be heard, so listen
10 – 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a realistic view of death and its permanence. • Asks specific questions about death, the body, etc. • Interested in the gory details. • Concerned with practical questions. (Who will take care of me? How will my family's life style change?) • Identifies strongly with deceased. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upset by the disruption in their lives • Blame others for the loss • Separation anxiety, some denial and/or guilt • Difficulty concentrating • Decline in school performance • Want to be "fixers" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permission and outlets to express feelings, including anger, relief, sadness, etc. • Validation of feelings • Offers of support and assistance and to know who can help them to be heard, so listen, listen, and listen
13 – 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes that life is fragile; death is inevitable and irreversible. • May worry about own death. • Often tries not to think or talk about the death. • Sometimes hides feelings so as not to look different from peers. • Ponders and questions religious and philosophical beliefs. • Often angry at the deceased or at people involved in the death (e.g. doctors). • Fears the future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggression, anger • Possessiveness • Somatic complaints • Phobias • Increased risk taking • Promiscuity • Increased drug/alcohol use • Defiance • Delinquent acts • Suicidal ideation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A trusted adult or peer for support • Parental openness in sharing feelings • Help in learning to manage feelings • Continued emotional support • Presence of parents • Encouragement of efforts toward independence

ACTIVITIES



ACTIVITY FOR KIDS TO UNDERSTAND DEATH

MATERIALS:

- **Books:**
 1. [The Dead Bird](#) by M.W. Brown (3-7 yrs.)
 2. [Lifetimes](#) by B. Mellonie and R. Ingpen (5-10 yrs.)
- **A container to collect objects**
- **A camera to take pictures of objects**
- **A walk through nature (ex. forest, beach) and/or a picture walk through magazines, etc.**

GOAL

Children will share their perceptions about the differences between things in nature that are alive, dead and inanimate to help them understand about the cycle of life and death as an acceptable topic.

INSTRUCTIONS

Children are naturally curious about the details of life and death, and it can be uncomfortable for adults to respond to children's questions. Fortunately, nature abounds with examples, and provides opportunities for children to observe and make sense of the cycle of life. By engaging children in this type of active learning, death becomes a more acceptable topic of conversation and a more understandable concept.

1. For younger children, read the book *The Dead Bird* and give the child the opportunity to comment on the illustrations and the simple story. For older children, read the book *Lifetimes* and ask the child to listen to discover what all living things have in common. For both age groups, the main idea is that all living things have beginnings and endings, with living in between.
2. Take a walk outside, or as an alternative, skim through magazines, catalogues or the internet. Encourage the child to collect examples of many different types of objects that are living (for example, bugs, plants, fish, etc.); dead (for example, fallen leaves, bugs, sticks, etc.); and inanimate objects (for example toys, computers, bottles.)
3. Have the children sort the objects and/or pictures into these three categories. Discuss the characteristics of things that are alive, things that are dead, and how this relates to people. Ask questions such as "How do we know this is alive or dead?"; "Where does this live?"; "What happens when it dies?" For inanimate objects, the concept is that these are neither alive nor dead. "Is something alive if it moves?" (for example, a wind-up toy); "Is something alive if it is warm?" (for example, a glass of warm water).
4. Depending on the interest of the child, this could be an ongoing activity of collecting and categorizing objects. Encourage the child to think about the cycle of life, what all living things have in common, and what all dead things have in common.

SHOW AND SHARE

MATERIALS:

- Items that belonged to or in some way represent the person who died

GOAL

Memories are often connected to items. The sweater that your mom wore all the time, the cologne your dad wore, the bracelet you were given as a gift. Seeing or holding the item can bring back all of the stories that are connected to the item and the person who died. By sharing the item it provides the opportunity to share the stories and memories. For some, the same item will remind them of different stories and memories. Having these conversations creates a comfortable environment to continue sharing about the person who died in the future.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask the child to gather any special items that remind them of their person who died. If you have items that remind you of the person who died bring those as well to participate.
2. Invite the child share the keepsake they have brought with them. Encourage them to share details about the item.
 - Where did it come from?
 - What stories does this item remind you of?
 - Why it is important to you?
 - How do you feel when you see this item?
3. If you brought items, share those as well with the child answering the above prompts.
4. Encourage future sharing of items and memories when the child is thinking about their person who died.

TOKENS OF REMEMBRANCE

MATERIALS:

- **Book:** *Badger's Parting Gift* by Susan Varley
- **Paper, crayons and markers**

GOAL

Children will use the story to help them remember and identify “gifts” they have received from their person who died.

INSTRUCTIONS

Part of remembering the person who died, staying connected, and keeping their memories integrated includes seeing qualities in ourselves that come from them and saving special items. Children may have a shirt, blanket, stuffed animal, photograph, or other items that become important to them in remembering their person who died. It is also helpful for adults to identify for children qualities that they possess which are shared qualities with the person who died. When naming qualities also share stories with the child.

1. Before starting to read, show the book *Badger's Parting Gifts* to the child and ask what they think is meant by “parting gifts.” Tell the child that as you read the book the child can learn why Badger is going away and what gifts he is giving to his friends.
2. Read *Badger's Parting Gifts* together. As you read, be sure to give the child a chance to look at the illustrations and comment on what they are seeing.
3. After the story, ask questions to allow the child to understand the book.

What happened to Badger? How did his friends feel when he was gone? What helped them to feel better? What were Badger's “parting gifts?”

4. Explain that Badger and their friend who died gave a gift to each of these friends. Ask the child to think about what gifts they may have from their person who died. It can be an item, a part of their personality, or something they have in common. Give examples to help such as the color of their eyes, a skill they learned, their smile, a special item, etc.
5. Invite the child to draw the “parting gifts” that they have from their person and find a special place to hang and remember.

GATHERING MEMORIES

MATERIALS:

- Envelope
- Notecards
- A pencil

GOAL

Children will identify ways they can continue their connection with the person who died by sharing stories, memories, and traditions with each other.

INSTRUCTIONS

Memories can become harder to remember and for some, they have limited memories with their person who died. By sharing memories, traditions and stories with those who knew the person who died allow for the gathering of memories and remembrance of the person who died.

1. Each child will decorate an envelope that will be filled with thoughts, stories, and memories about the person who died.
2. The child starts with writing memories and stories they know of their person who died on index cards or pieces of paper and place in the envelope.
3. Have a discussion around stories and memories the child wishes they knew about their person. Write down questions on index cards that others can help fill up.
4. Talk about who might be able to share that information about the person. Together, come up with how the child can get in touch with those people to learn more stories and memories.
5. Continue to revisit the envelope and add stories, memories, and traditions to it. Holidays and family gatherings are opportunities to continually re-visit this envelope and add to it.

ANTICIPATING QUESTIONS (REFLECTIONS)

HOW DO I TELL MY CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

See tip sheet on pages 15 & 16

IS MY CHILD GOING TO BE TRAUMATIZED?

Death is a normal part of the human experience. Trauma is a self-perceived threat so depending on how the death happened, a child may have a traumatic response. This is not easily assessed in the early days because many trauma responses look like acute grief. If the family has concerns, encourage them to check-in with a mental health professional who has grief experience and to consult online resources (unfortunately, some people like to pathologize grief and label it as traumatic when it is not. It is important that a family finds a professional that is the right fit).

SHOULD MY CHILD ATTEND THE FUNERAL?

Yes, yes, yes. The only exception is if a child decides s/he does not want to but that decision needs to be well-informed. A well-informed child will have received information about what is going to happen without bias. Few children and youth will opt out if given the information they need to make the decision.

HOW DO I EXPLAIN DEATH TO MY CHILD?

See tip sheet on pages 13 & 14

MY IN-LAWS DON'T THINK THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH SHOULD PARTICIPATE. WHAT DO I DO?

Acknowledge that family dynamics are complicated. [The Youth & Funerals video](#) is designed to help adults navigate family dynamics. An unbiased, professional, and experienced third party is helping you advocate for the children and youth.

I DON'T THINK MY CHILD CAN HANDLE THIS. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

This is a question that is likely rooted in fear. You have all the resources you need to show this adult otherwise. But first, spend the time trying to understand the fear and concerns. What does this parent think is the worst thing that will happen? And from there, begin to introduce your wisdom.



“ Being at my dad’s funeral was important to me, because *my dad* was important to me.



**Good Grief builds resilience in children,
strengthens families, and empowers communities
to grow from loss and adversity**



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