



INFORMATION FOR HELPING CHILDREN WITH GRIEF

HAMILTON POLICE SERVICE
VICTIM SERVICES BRANCH
www.hamiltonpolice.on.ca



Special thank you to Cara Grosset, RSW, PhD, FT, and Kat Turco, BCYC, OACYC for updating the contents of this document (2024) that was originally published by Public Health, City of Hamilton in 1997 and previously updated in 2005. This resource has been re-designed and re-printed by the Victim Services Branch of the Hamilton Police Service to assist families with information and resources with respect to children and grief.

All efforts have been made to ensure that the information in this handbook is accurate and complete. This handbook is provided for general education and informational purposes only. Please consult with a professional for additional assistance.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILDREN WITH THEIR GRIEF?

This booklet is designed to help you support your child in their grief. It is presented in a way that children of similar ages are grouped together. However, please remember that every child is unique and there may be some overlap from one age to another. You may want to read about children in all age groups in order to best help your child.

Most children can cope with their grief reactions when they get the support they need. Remember that you are grieving too, so you may not have much energy for your children right now. This is normal. Seek support for yourself as well.

HELPFUL HINTS...

To Help Your Child During The Grieving Time, Remember That:

- ▶ Children should be told about the death as soon as possible after it has happened. If you are unable to talk with them, someone the child is close to can do this by using age-appropriate words that they will understand.
- ▶ It is best to use the word dead. Avoid using words like sleep, taken away, or gone on a trip. These phrases can confuse and frighten children.
- ▶ Children grieve losses in their lives. They feel sadness and hurt when someone dies. Feeling the pain and working it through is how they will heal. They don't always "get over it" quickly. Sometimes it takes a long time. They will re-experience the loss in different ways at different times in their life – this is natural.
- ▶ Children grieve in a different way than adults. They have different ways of showing their grief. They may have a shorter tolerance for intense emotions, and may want to get back to their usual routine quickly. Wanting to go out and play, or go to their soccer game is normal - children take breaks from their grief by engaging in their regular daily activities.
- ▶ Children need to be taken care of. They cannot take care of you. They need to see that you are hurting but that you are also healing. If you can't meet their daily needs at first due to your intense grief, that's OK, have a trusted family member or friend help out.
- ▶ Children need to have their questions answered. They will wonder: "Will this happen to me? Did I cause this to happen? Who will take care of me now?" Answer these questions in an honest way with clear language.
- ▶ Children need to have someone to talk to openly. If you can't be that person right now, ask a family member, friend, teacher, etc. who your child knows to provide this support for your child.
- ▶ The main concepts in understanding death include:
 - Irreversibility (once a person dies, they can't come back to life)
 - Non-functionality (a dead person does not feel pain, they don't breathe and they don't need to eat)
 - Universality (every living thing dies)
 - Causality (what caused the death)
 - Personal mortality (I will die too)

CHILDREN GRIEVE DIFFERENTLY AT DIFFERENT AGES

A young child will grieve (at the time of the death) and may grieve again when they reach a different stage of development as an older child or even in adulthood. The following describes, in general, how children may grieve at each age and how you can help. Check out <https://www.kidsgrief.ca/> for more information and resources.

BIRTH TO 2 YEARS

These children...

- ▶ Have no understanding of death as a concept.
- ▶ Have a strong attachment to parent/caregiver/sibling, so if this person dies, they may protest their absence through crying, temper tantrums, and/or separation anxiety reactions.
- ▶ Due to their lack of understanding at this age, as long as they are provided with a dependable parent/caregiver “substitute” they have a better chance for typical development and can work to understand the death as they get older.
- ▶ Will respond to emotional upset sensed in parent/caregiver and in the environment.
- ▶ May be grumpier and their eating and sleeping times may change. These changes do not usually last very long.

Suggestions:

- ▶ Keep to a routine as much as possible.
- ▶ Hold and play with them often.
- ▶ Get help to take care of them from friends and family, if possible.
- ▶ Let them know that someone will take care of them.

AGES 3 TO 5

These children...

- ▶ Need to know that death is not like sleeping. Their ideas about what “dead” means may not always be right. They may think of death as a monster or ghost.
- ▶ Do not understand time very well. They may ask about when the loved one is coming back. There is the belief that death is reversible.
- ▶ Ask lots of questions which may shock you. They may ask about what happens to the body in the ground or about what it is like to be dead. It is important to be consistent with answers regarding the reality of death, as the child will need to hear the message over and over again.
- ▶ Most children this age may first experience death through the death of an animal (a pet, an animal on the road) – adults can use these moments as “teachable moments” to discuss life and death.
- ▶ They may not show sadness right after someone dies. This is normal. They may want to play, which helps them with their feelings. They may have short times when they feel sad, angry, afraid, etc.
- ▶ Sometimes tell everyone, even strangers that the loved one has died. It probably helps them to understand what has happened and how they should feel.
- ▶ May have trouble eating, sleeping, or going to the bathroom. They may get stomach aches, headaches, or rashes. They may start to do things they had stopped doing like thumb sucking or having temper tantrums. This is normal for children under stress.
- ▶ May be more afraid than they used to be. Sometimes they have nightmares.
- ▶ May think that they made the death happen because at some time they were mad at the loved one.

Suggestions:

- ▶ Use the correct words like dead, died, dying.
- ▶ Answer their questions simply and honestly. If you don't have an answer, tell them that, and ask what they think.
- ▶ Tell your children that you love them and will take care of them. Hold them and play with them often.
- ▶ Tell them that they did not make the death happen and that they cannot make the person come back to life again.
- ▶ Tell them that their feelings and their questions are normal.
- ▶ Keep a routine as much as possible.

AGES 6 TO 10

These children...

- ▶ They are starting to understand what “dead” means, but they usually think it only happens to other people and/or older people.
- ▶ Still have magical thinking – they can think they did or thought something that caused the person’s death.
- ▶ Some typical questions and worries include – How did they die? Will I die? Who else will die? Who will take care of me? What is dead? What happens to the dead person?
- ▶ They have a better understanding that death is irreversible and inevitable.
- ▶ Need to know that it is normal for grief to take a long time and that it does not happen all at once.
- ▶ May have trouble at school. They may have trouble concentrating on their work. Other children may not be kind to them.
- ▶ May get headaches or stomach aches.
- ▶ May get angry because the loved one died. They may blame the doctors or God or even you.
- ▶ Ask if there is a group for children to go to for support. Sometimes these children will talk more to kids their own age.

Suggestions:

- ▶ Give your children simple, honest answers to their questions.
- ▶ Tell them that grief doesn’t happen all at once but will come and go.
- ▶ Talk to your child’s teacher and let them know about the death. Have the teacher read this booklet and ask that they let you know if your child has any problems at school.
- ▶ Help your child have answers when other children ask them questions. Your child can just say “_____ died”. If the other children continue to ask questions and this bothers your child, then your child can just say they don’t want to talk about it.
- ▶ Make time each day to talk with your child.
- ▶ Get help from one of the services listed at the end of the pamphlet if you are worried about your child.

AGES 10 TO 13

These children...

- ▶ Usually understand that death is final and that everyone dies. Capable of seeing death as biological, universal, and inevitable.
- ▶ Can describe their feelings of grief.
- ▶ May try to hide their feelings. They may keep feelings inside and not cry for fear of upsetting their parents. Children of this age can be sensitive and do not want to feel they have hurt their parents by “making them cry”. It’s important to let them know that you are sad too and they aren’t causing you more pain.
- ▶ Know both old and young people die.
- ▶ Can develop fear that parents/sibling/grandparents/caregiver/friends might die. A child may avoid certain activities that take them away from their family because of this fear.
- ▶ May not be able to concentrate and do their school work.

Suggestions:

- ▶ Spend time with your children. Sometimes these children will talk more about their feelings when they are busy doing something else with you- like shopping, driving in the car, or playing games.
- ▶ You can ask questions about how they are feeling. Let them know that all feelings are okay.
- ▶ Provide them with creative outlets for their grief – drawing, writing, dance, etc.
- ▶ Keep them physically active, if possible, through play, organized sports.
- ▶ Help them to understand that the person will always be important in their lives even though they aren’t physically present anymore.
- ▶ Talk to the teacher, a social worker, a public health nurse, and others about how to help, what to expect, and where to get help. Ask if there is a group for children to go to for bereavement support. Sometimes these children will talk more to kids their own age.

AGES 14 TO 18

These youth...

- ▶ Have the ability to problem solve at a more complex level than younger children and they have the ability to think in an abstract manner.
- ▶ Sometimes can develop a fascination with death, the death of others, and their own death.
- ▶ May not be in touch with finality of death and be engaging in risk-taking behaviours.
- ▶ They need to talk. May talk to other people about their feelings and not to you. This is okay because they may not want to upset or hurt you with what they are feeling.
- ▶ May look for ways to numb the pain of grief by using drugs and alcohol.
- ▶ May have thoughts of suicide.
- ▶ May try to be like the person who died.
- ▶ May withdraw from family and friends or other social activities.
- ▶ May not be able to concentrate and do their school work.

Suggestions:

- ▶ Try to keep a sense of structure and balance at home. Don't try to over-protect your child and be prepared to set reasonable limits.
- ▶ Watch for signs of depression like not doing the things they used to, showing no emotion, changes in eating and sleeping, or even talking about death all the time. Get professional help if you think your child is depressed.
- ▶ Encourage them to talk so that their feelings are not kept inside and then turned onto themselves.
- ▶ Ask if there is a bereavement group for teenagers to go to for support. Sometimes youth will talk more to kids their own age.
- ▶ Give your child lots of opportunities to talk about feelings.
- ▶ If you think your child is suicidal, get help immediately.
- ▶ Even though they are grown up in many ways, these children still need you to be in charge. Let them take on some new responsibilities, like household chores, but make sure that they don't start to act too much like the person who died.

AGES 19 & OVER

- ▶ These young adults understand death and know how it has changed their lives.
 - ▶ They are going through a time when they have a lot of decisions to make about their futures. They may feel that they have to take care of you now.
 - ▶ They will be experiencing a lot to transitions and special occasions where they will notice the absence of the person who died. This will trigger some grief reactions. This is normal.
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Suggestions:

- ▶ Talk to them about the changes they are going through and how they may be missing the person who died.
- ▶ It may be hard but help them to think about what they need to do for themselves and not what they need to do for you.
- ▶ Look for a group for young adults to go to for support, in your community or at their post-secondary institution. Sometimes young adults will talk more to people their own age.



WHEN A LOVED ONE DIES FROM SUICIDE

Any death is a traumatic event. A child grieving the death of someone from suicide will experience all the typical grief reactions others will. However, some feelings are stronger or more intense, and there are often feelings of guilt and shame. They may experience trauma reactions such as flashbacks, hypervigilance, sleep/eating disturbances, etc. which they will need support for from you, your physician, and/or a counselling professional.

A suicide death leaves us with many unanswered questions and may leave a child feeling helpless.

Suggestions:

- ▶ Because suicide is hard to understand, many people are uncomfortable talking about it. If you are uncomfortable with talking about suicide with your child, find some support for yourself so that you can talk about it, or ask for help from a family member, friend or professional.
- ▶ There is no perfect age to tell a child about suicide. A child who is old enough to understand what the words mean could be told that the loved one has ended their life. It is better for the child to learn this from someone they love rather than to overhear gossip. What a child imagines happened can be more frightening than the truth. As the child gets older, they may have questions which can be answered with more details.
- ▶ It is common for a child to believe that they are responsible for the suicide because of something they said or did. The child should be reassured that it was not their fault nor could they have prevented the suicide.
- ▶ Suicide does not have a common cause. It may be because someone's brain wasn't working properly (mental illness), or it may have been an impulsive decision, or a variety of struggles they felt they couldn't overcome.
- ▶ Reassure the child that the person who died loved them. These children need to be given the opportunity to talk, ask questions, receive support and if the need arises, be counselled by a professional.
- ▶ Help the child understand there are other solutions to struggles in life. Suicide is not the only answer.
- ▶ With support, children who experience the death of a loved one by suicide can experience healthy healing, recovery, and they can learn to live with the loss.
- ▶ Check out this module at [mygrief.ca](https://mygrief.ca/mod/lesson/view.php?id=1010) for more helpful information <https://mygrief.ca/mod/lesson/view.php?id=1010>

WHEN A LOVED ONE DIES A VIOLENT DEATH

A violent, senseless act has ended the life of a loved one. When this happens, a child's grief may be extended, and the child may think a lot about why this happened and whether it could happen to them. As with suicide death, when a violent death has occurred, children and youth may experience trauma reactions such as flashbacks, hypervigilance, sleep/eating disturbances, etc. which they will need support for from you, your physician, and/or a counselling professional.

In reality, we never 'get over' the tragedy, but there are ways to help your child learn to live with the loss.

Suggestions:

- ▶ Answer the child's questions honestly. What a child imagines can be more frightening than the truth.
- ▶ Tears are a part of the healing process. Encourage the child to express his/her feelings. Share some of your feelings with the child.
- ▶ Talk about how this kind of death makes everyone angry.
- ▶ Reassure the child that you will be there for them and, when possible, routines will not be changed due to the event. This will provide a sense of security.
- ▶ If the media and/or courts are involved, you may choose to try to shield them from some of the details, but keep in mind that they may learn information from less reliable sources than you like through social media and/or word-of-mouth.

CHILDREN HAVE ADJUSTED TO THE DEATH WHEN:

- ▶ They know that the death is final and that the person is not coming back.
- ▶ They have a new life and are comfortable in it.
- ▶ They are doing things pretty much like they used to or in a way that seems typical for their age.
- ▶ They have found a way to talk about the person and continue a relationship with them in a way that they are comfortable with. For some children, this may mean wearing a piece of jewelry or clothing of the person's, making a scrapbook, engaging in fundraising for a cause related to the person's death, journaling, etc.

Remember that on special occasions like birthdays, holidays, graduations, and anniversaries, everyone will feel sad again, even for years after the death. This is natural and is a time to revisit memories and our grief.

Sometimes when there is some other major change, like changing schools, moving, or losing a friend, children feel many of the things they felt at the time of the death.

In many ways grief can last a lifetime, however, it does become easier to live with as time goes on and support continues.



WHERE TO GET HELP FOR CHILDREN

Bereaved Families of Ontario – South Central Region (BFO-SCR) 905-318-0070 **<https://www.bfoscr.com/>**

BFO-SCR provides bereavement support for parents when a child has died; for children (aged 5-13, TLC for Kids); and, high school students (Missing Pieces the Grief Puzzle) when a family member or close friend dies. All of BFO's services are free of charge. BFO has a lending library of books that may be helpful to grieving families and individuals.

Bereavement Ontario Network **www.bereavementontarionetwork.ca**

Bereavement Ontario Network is a diverse group of organizations and individuals throughout the province that work in the field of grief, bereavement, and mourning as professionals and volunteers. There is a public directory of members throughout the province available online.

Lynwood Charlton Centre 905-389-1361 **www.lynwoodcharlton.ca**

Access and system navigation for child and youth mental health supports.

Camp Keaton, Kemp Care Network 905-387-2448 **<https://kempcarenetwork.org/grief-bereavement-programs/camp-keaton/>**

Camp Keaton is a free, weekend long bereavement camp designed for children and youth aged 7-17 years who have experienced the death of someone important to them.

Child & Youth Bereavement Support and Workshops, Kemp Care Network 905-387-2448

<https://kempcarenetwork.org/grief-bereavement-programs/child-grief-support/>

Kemp Care Network understands that children and youth experience grief differently from adults. We offer a safe place for various grief programs designed for young minds. Through games, cooking, art and storytelling, kids of all ages bond through shared experiences and learn essential life skills that will help them throughout their lives. Time-limited, 1-1 sessions also available.

COAST (Crisis Outreach and Support Services) 905-972-8338 *Crisis line is answered 24/7*

www.coasthamilton.ca

Community crisis support for youth, adults, and seniors. Mobile crisis team consisting of child & youth workers who are connected to a variety of mental health and social service agencies that will be able to help you in a crisis situation.

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

www.kidshelpphone.ca

24/7 free, anonymous and confidential telephone and web counselling for children and teenagers.

Hamilton Police Services, Victim Services Branch 905-546-4904

Victim Services Branch provides 24/7 assistance to victims of crime and trauma. Staff and specially trained volunteers provide practical assistance, emotional support and referrals for community resources.

Other areas of assistance may be found through:

- ▶ Your Employment Assistance Program (EAP) and/or extended healthcare benefits for counselling, should you have employment that includes these benefits.
- ▶ Some Funeral Homes and churches offer grief/bereavement information, support groups, and counselling.
- ▶ Family Physicians sometimes have Social Workers as part of their staff, and they may be able to assist (e.g., Ontario Health Teams).



SUGGESTED READING

CHILDREN

The Memory Tree. By: Britta Teckentrup

Why Do Things Die? By: Katie Daynes

When Someone You Love Has Died.

By: Stephanie Seidler

The Kissing Hand. By: Audrey Penn

The Burst Balloon. By: Cher Louise Jones

The Invisible String. By: Patrice Karst

Life is Like the Wind. By: Shona Innes

The Gift of Gerbert's Feathers.

By: Meaghann Weaver & Lori Wiener

Something Lost Something Found.

By: Natalia Paruzel-Gibson

The Immortal Jellyfish. By: Sang Miao

TEENS

Hello Grief. I'll Be Right With You.

By: Alessandra Olanow

How It Feels to Float. By: Helena Fox

When a Friend Dies By: Marilyn E. Gootman

The Dead Moms Club. By: Kate Spencer

Welcome to the Grief Club. By: Janine Kwoh

PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

A Child's View of Grief, Dr. Alan Wolfelt

Grief in Young Children: A Handbook for Adults, Atle Dyregrov

The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide, Helen Fitzgerald

What Children Need When They Grieve — the Four Essentials: Routine, Love, Honesty, and Security, Julia Rathkey

Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids: 100 Practical Ideas, Dr. Alan Wolfelt

After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal, Margo Requarth



ONLINE RESOURCES

www.mygrief.ca - Confidential and free, myGrief.ca helps you to understand and move through your grief. There are 28 online modules related to understanding grief, supporting griever, and exploring different causes of death.

www.kidsgrief.ca - a free online resource that helps parents support their children when someone in their life is dying or has died. It equips parents with the words and confidence needed to help children grieve life's losses in healthy ways.

www.livingmyculture.ca - people from various cultures share their stories and wisdom about living with serious illness, end of life and grief to support others.

griefstories.org - Grief Stories HEALS by mobilizing the power of community through sharing stories that help those in grief feel: Hopeful, Empowered, Accepted, Less alone, Supported.

www.dougy.org - The Dougy Center for grieving children and their families is in Oregon. Online grief resources including podcasts.

www.griefsucks.com - GRIEF SUCKS was built by the Experience Camps' Youth Advisory Board, pre-teens and teens who care deeply about helping the public understand how to better support grieving children.

www.whatsyourgrief.com - a grief website and online community for grieving people and grief support professionals. We honor all types of loss and grief.

www.sesameworkshop.org/grief - Sesame Street's When Families Grieve presents families' personal stories about coping with the death of a parent, as well as strategies that have helped these families move forward.



FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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