

INSIGHTS

How to help your kids cope when someone close to them dies



When somebody close dies it can be difficult to help your kids cope with their grief, especially as you struggle to work through your own. What kids understand about death depends on how old they are, what they have experienced in their life, and also their personality type.

In all cases though, death must be explained in a child's terms, and you must be honest with them and encourage them to ask questions, even though you may not have all the answers.

The following practical tips and ideas will help you to help your child cope when somebody close to them dies:

- When discussing the death with your children, it is important you let them know you are there for them and that there is no right or wrong way to feel. You should also explain that everybody deals with death in their own way.
- Any spiritual beliefs you have around death can be shared at this point. This can provide some comfort to the child.
- Until they are around five or six years old, a child views the world quite differently to you. So when explaining that somebody has died, you could simply say that the loved one's heart stopped working and the doctor wasn't able to fix it, or something like that to help them understand what has happened.
- It is difficult for children to understand that all people will eventually die and never come back, so be patient with them if they continue to ask when they are going to see them next, or when they are coming back.
- Kids are very curious creatures and may want to know where the loved one is now. If they have been buried, your answer may simply be "At the cemetery", and of course if your spiritual beliefs include the existence of heaven or something similar, then you could tell them that they are now in heaven.
- As your kids get older and in particular into their teens, they begin to gain a full understanding of what death means, so you can talk to them quite differently – more at your level – about the death.
- Whether it is okay to take your child to a funeral or not depends totally on the situation surrounding the death, and how you and your child feel about them attending. No child should be forced to attend a funeral if they really don't want to.
- You should talk to your child about the funeral beforehand, explaining to them what will happen, such as seeing the casket, and of course the fact that there will be people there who may be crying.
- If you are worried about letting your kids witness your own grief, don't be. Allowing them to see your pain allows them to see that crying is a natural reaction to losing someone close. It will also make them feel more comfortable in sharing how they feel.



While children will not show their grief in the same way as an adult, they will grieve in their own way. A teen may not be comfortable confiding in you, but will be able to talk through their grief with a friend, but whatever their reaction you should not take it personally.

It is important at this point to watch for any signs that your child is not coping with the loss. Any significant behavioral changes such as anger, being withdrawn, being extremely anxious or even a dramatic reduction in their grades at school should be taken seriously, and you should therefore seek professional help.

Grieving the loss of a loved one is a gradual process, and it is important you remain patient with your child as they learn to deal with losing someone they love. By offering them support and encouragement, they will be able to cope in their own way.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.