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SESAME STREET

**What's Inside:**

- Ways to offer comfort and reassurance
- Activities to help children cope and express feelings
- Ideas for building empathy

# Growing as We Grieve

A special guide for providers supporting children who are grieving



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# Growing as We Grieve

Children who are grieving enter your program every day. According to the National Alliance for Children's Grief,<sup>1</sup> an estimated 6 million children in the U.S. will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18. While this kind of loss feels unimaginable, consistent care from a supportive adult like you can help children identify their emotions and feel comforted, secure, and even hopeful as they grieve.

When supporting a grieving child, it can be difficult to know where to start. Use this guide to gain a foundational understanding of how grief may look and feel for children at different ages. Explore activities to help them express big feelings and discover ways to build empathy in every child. Remember, you don't have to have every answer, but your understanding can make a big difference for a grieving child.



1. DeAngelis, T. (2023, April 21). Thousands of kids lost loved ones to the pandemic. Psychologists are teaching them how to grieve, and then thrive. *Monitor on Psychology*, 53(7). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/kids-covid-grief>

# Grieving in Our Own Way

**Grief encompasses the emotional, mental, and physical reactions felt after experiencing a loss.** Children (and grown-ups) may grieve after the death of someone in their lives and experience related big changes, such as the end of an important relationship or the loss of a way of life, a home, or school.

**Children grieve differently than adults.** How a child's grief presents itself can depend on their age and stage of emotional development. For instance, young children experience grief in short bursts. They might feel intense emotions one minute and before you can respond, they're back to playing peacefully. Becoming familiar with how grief shows up in young children can help you support and nurture them. For children of all ages, keep routines—at home and in your program—as consistent as possible.



**Grief is unique.** The circumstances around the death of a person can play a role in how families experience grief. Keep in mind that children and families may:

- have expected and prepared for a death, such as when a person in their lives has a long-term illness.
- have been surprised by a death, perhaps because the person died in a way that was unexpected, frightening, or traumatic.
- have experienced grief alongside others in their community (after a tragedy).
- at times receive hurtful comments from others about why or how the person died.

Do your best to remember that grief is not a “one size fits all” experience. As you already do, meet each child where they are, offering reassurance that the death and any other big changes are not their fault.



# Grief at Ages and Stages

As children grow and change, their grief changes, too. As a caring provider, your compassion is your superpower. It can help you be attentive, observant, and flexible—ready to offer support in a way that meets the child where they are. But rest assured, you don't have to (and won't!) have all the answers. Remember that your time, attention, and presence are meaningful.

**Review these descriptions of what grief may look like at different ages and stages.**

**What do you notice from children in your care?**

## How babies and toddlers grieve

Babies and toddlers don't understand the concept of death. However, they do understand changes in their environment and can "pick up" on distress around them. At this age, children generally can't use language to ask questions or communicate feelings.

**Grief in babies and toddlers may show up as:**

- increased crying, irritability, clinginess
- looking for the person who has died
- anxiety around strangers
- less interest in play or food
- regression

**How you can help:**

- provide physical comfort and affection by holding and cuddling them
- do your best to speak calmly around them
- provide familiar comforts such as favorite blankets and stuffed animals
- when possible, maintain consistent caregivers

## How preschoolers grieve

Preschoolers might not comprehend that death is permanent. Their understanding is very literal at this age, so it's important to be as clear as possible by using words such as "dead" and "died." Using phrases like "lost," "passed away," and "moved on" may cause confusion. Children might expect that a loved one is coming back or ask to find them.

**Grief in preschoolers may show up as:**

- crying more, clinginess, and being fearful
- looking or calling out for the person who has died
- tantrums, irritability, stubbornness, withdrawal
- changes in eating or sleeping habits
- regression in skills or behaviors
- sensing the person who has died

**How you can help:**

- support them with physical affection such as hugs and holding their hand
- help children learn and use words that describe their feelings
- encourage creative play and movement to express and release big feelings

## How school-aged children grieve

At this age, children understand that death is permanent. They might ask more questions, such as how or why the person died. Children become aware that death is a part of life and may worry about their own lives and the lives of their friends and family members.

When possible, speak with families first to ask how they talk about the death. Answer questions honestly and provide enough information to help children fill in the gaps or gently correct misunderstandings. Remind children that the death is not their fault. Keep in mind that children will ask the questions that they are ready to hear the answers to.

### Grief in school-aged children may show up as:

- blaming themselves for the person’s death
- looking for or sensing the person’s presence
- being distracted and forgetful
- having increased worry for their safety and the safety of people they care about
- separation anxiety
- not wanting to go to school
- physical complaints (such as stomachaches and headaches)
- withdrawal from usual activities
- being quiet or not showing any emotional responses
- strong emotional reactions such as anger, guilt, or embarrassment
- difficult behaviors (such as aggression, tantrums, defiance, trouble at school)
- change in eating and sleeping habits
- regression (such as bedwetting)

### How you can help:

- reassure children they are safe
- keep routines and boundaries on expected behavior
- encourage conversations about their emotions
- encourage creative play, movement, and/or art making as ways to express big feelings
- when possible, maintain consistent caregivers



There’s no time limit on grief. It can endure for months or years. As they grow, children will likely revisit questions and ask new ones to help make sense of their experiences. You won’t have all the answers, and that’s okay. Be assured that your caring presence—your willingness to listen, comfort, and simply be with the child—will help them move through and grow around their grief.



## You are safe here.

Children aren't always thinking about their grief—and you don't have to bring it up! There are lots of ways to help children feel supported in their grief without talking about it directly. You can...

- **Create an environment in which a child feels safe.** Offering a warm, consistent, welcoming presence can help children feel comfortable talking, playing, and expressing their feelings.
- **Offer a variety of ways for children to express themselves.** Grieving brings up a lot of emotions. Learning to notice, name, and express feelings can be helpful for children who are grieving.
- **Follow their lead. If a child wants to talk, practice active listening.** Use direct eye contact, stop what you're doing, and find a quiet place to listen. You might reflect back what they're saying: "You miss your \_\_\_\_." Try to sense the feelings behind the words, too.



### When big feelings get too big:

If a child becomes overwhelmed with emotion or begins to act in aggressive ways, it's okay to stop the activity. Be kind, but firm. **You might say:**

- "We're going to stop here. We might come back to this, but for now, I want to make sure you're safe."
- "Right now, it looks like you're, really upset."
- "Let's learn together what will help you work through this big feeling."

We want to help children release big feelings from their bodies, safely. **They might:**

- Kick or throw a ball outside
- Bang on a drum
- Run, stomp, or dance

Every child expresses themselves differently. Whenever possible, offer options and let the child choose what might help.

## You are not alone.

Children who are grieving often feel alone or isolated—like no one else really “gets it.” And chances are, other children in your program have felt or will feel that way.

Nurturing a sense of connectedness and encouraging empathy can help every child in your program be reminded that they aren’t alone.

Let children know that empathy is the ability to understand how someone else is feeling even when you aren’t in the same situation; it helps us to be kind to others. Then, try some of these activities with the children and families in your care:

- Shared Values:** Talking about shared values and establishing community ground rules can lay a foundation of empathy. Ask children what they feel is important to the community and give them the opportunity to listen to others. You might offer some ideas: I see that you enjoyed getting a turn to share, would ‘sharing with each other’ be a good thing to add to the list? Write your ideas on a sheet of paper and invite children to decorate it! Working together helps build trust.
- Story Time:** Choose books that model pro-social behaviors, such as sharing, appreciating differences, or being part of a team. As you read, pause to highlight sections in which characters are showing empathy. Talk about the decisions characters make which consider the feelings of others—or the ones that don’t. Be mindful of the family structures displayed in the books you choose, and how that may affect children who are grieving.
- Meaningful Moments:** When a child in your program is grieving, consider ways to do something kind that celebrates a person’s life. You might invite a child’s peers to make a special card, or organize a screening of a movie the grieving child used to watch with their loved one. Discuss plans with the family first, to offer support in a way that feels comfortable to them.



## We are all connected.

It helps kids to know they are valued by you—and their peers. Make a kindness chain to show that we're all connected by love. Gather paper, crayons or markers, tape or glue. Then:

Let children know that empathy is the ability to understand how someone else is feeling even when you aren't in the same situation; it helps us to be caring to others.

- Cut apart equal-size strips of paper and on each strip, write a name of a child in your program.
- Distribute the strips randomly and invite children to write or draw something kind about the child whose name is on their strip.
- Loop the strips to one another with tape or glue to create a kindness chain.
- Hang up the chain, adding new affirmations and occasionally reading through them together.



## We are steady.

When kids are overwhelmed or feel out of control, using their five senses can help them “tune in” to the present moment and “tune out” overstimulating input from the outside... or “turn down” the intensity of their own thoughts.

**Together or one-on-one, invite children to name...**

- five things they can see
- four things they can hear
- three things they can touch
- two things they can smell
- one thing they can taste

Remind children that it's okay to sometimes have big feelings or difficult thoughts, but that we don't have to be stuck in those feelings or thoughts. Our bodies can help remind us that we are safe and secure.

