



# THE Moodsters™

## Guidelines for Grown-ups

How To Talk With Your Child About Grief

# Guidelines for Grown-ups

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This booklet is for the grown-ups—the parents, guardians, and other caregivers who care for young children from birth to about age 7. It offers advice on how to talk to young children after a close family member or friend has died, and how to help them begin to cope.

We'll be honest: Some of the steps may sound simple, but this isn't easy—especially if you are also grieving. You may think you could have said or done something better.

What's most important is that children know you love them and are doing your best to help.

## Why Is It Necessary To Have These Conversations?

**Even infants and toddlers react to the death of someone important.**

They sense the distress of those around them; they're upset by disruptions in the usual schedule.

**WHAT TO DO:** Try to maintain routines. Show your child as much attention and affection as you're capable of. If possible, ask another adult to help with caregiving.

**It's hard to witness children's grief.** We often try to "cheer them up" or take away their pain. You can't. The most loving thing is to help them learn how to express and cope with their difficult feelings.

**WHAT TO DO:** Don't encourage them to "be strong." Avoid looking for "positives" ("He is happier now that he is with God"). Encourage children to express their feelings, and don't try to minimize or change those feelings.

**It's difficult for caregivers to talk about death when they themselves are grieving.** It's okay to let children know that you don't have all the answers. Listening to and being present for them is much of what they need.

**WHAT TO DO:** Reach out to family, friends, and teachers to help support your child. Ask for advice from your child's doctor. And be sure to ask for and accept support for yourself.

## What's Going On Inside Your Grieving Child?

**Children often feel guilty after a death.** Young children believe that their thoughts, wishes, and actions can cause things to happen. They may conclude that they did something bad to cause the person's death.

**WHAT TO DO:** Reassure them that they were *not* responsible, that thoughts and wishes do not make someone die.

**Children may be angry.** They may blame others for the death, or feel angry at the person who died for leaving them.

**WHAT TO DO:** Let them know it's okay to be angry—but that it's not okay to take out your anger by hitting or hurting others.

**Children may worry that you will die, too—or that they will.** They may see you struggling with strong feelings and feel reluctant to ask questions because they feel it upsets you.

**WHAT TO DO:** Let them know that it's ok – and helpful – to share difficult thoughts and feelings.

**Children may not appear to be grieving.** They may cry briefly and then return to play as if nothing happened. Sometimes they use play as a way to figure out what death means and to work through their feelings.

**WHAT TO DO:** Encourage creative activities, such as drawing, to express and process feelings. You can ask them to describe what's in the drawing, but don't try to interpret everything you see.

## What Your Grieving Child Needs

**They need your attention.**

**They need your love.**

**They need to see you grieve.** We can't expect children to share their distress if we pretend that we have no distress ourselves, or to learn coping strategies if we don't model them. Let your children see you crying, talking with friends, and speaking openly about the person who died.

**They need to understand what happened.** Be sure to use the words "dead" or "died." Euphemisms such as "gone away" or "everlasting sleep" confuse young children who may worry when others travel far away or be scared about going to sleep at night.





## The Four Truths

Be sure young children understand the four major concepts of death:

- 1. Death is irreversible.** If children don't understand that death is permanent, they may believe the person will return—and they are prevented from grieving.
- 2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.** Children who don't understand this concept are more likely to worry that someone who has died is cold, hungry, or in pain.
- 3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.** If children don't understand this, they may conclude that something they did caused this person to die. This increases the chance they feel guilty or ashamed about the death.
- 4. There are physical reasons why someone dies.** If children do not understand the reasons for a death, they are more likely to make up explanations that contribute to guilt or shame.

With explanation, even toddlers can begin to understand these concepts - children learn “all gone” at a very early age.

## Moving Forward

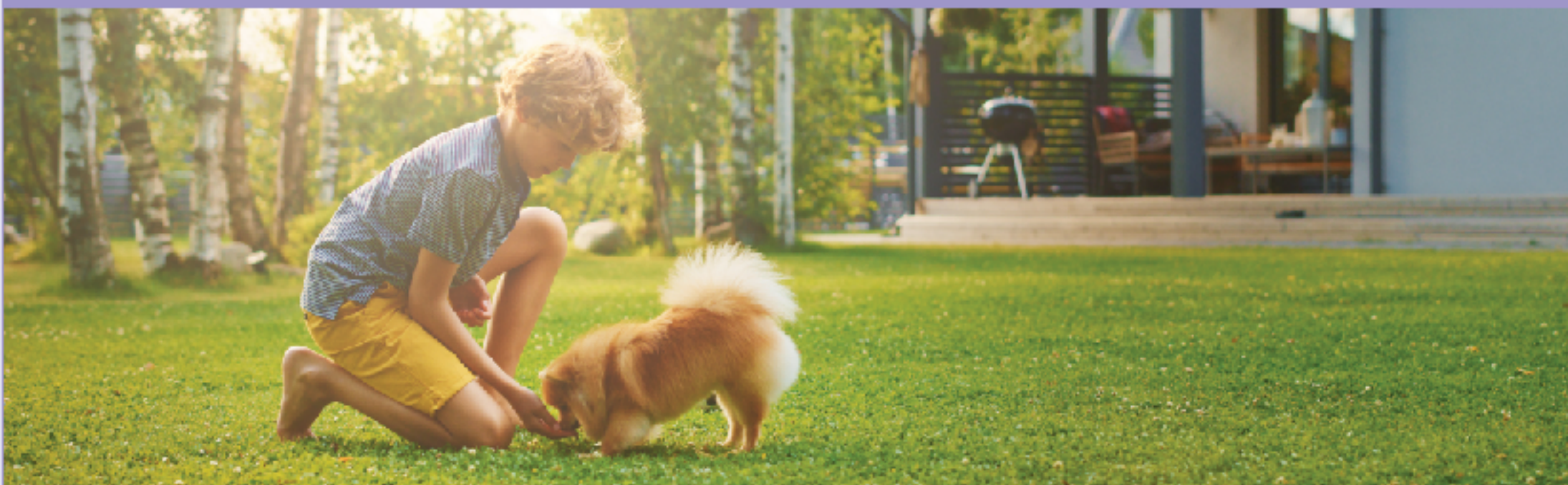
**Invite children to participate in wakes, funerals, and other memorial services.**

- Explain the event in simple terms: Where it will occur, whether there will be an open casket, what they will see and hear (people crying? people telling funny stories? both?).
- Offer them a simple task, like helping to pick a favorite flower for a display.
- When they're older, they may appreciate having been part of such an important service.
- However, don't force them to participate in anything they find upsetting.

**Children never “get over” the death of someone they love. In fact, they may not really understand the implications until they get older.**

**It's important to:**

- Preserve memories—e.g., save voice recordings, videos, and pictures.
- Continue traditions that involved the deceased.
- Tell and retell stories with positive memories, especially as they involve the child.
- Offer children comfort in a pillow, a picture, or an article of clothing that the child associates with the person who died.



## For More Information And Support

The New York Life Foundation offers a free booklet: *After a loved one dies – How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them*. It is available free of charge in both English and Spanish (shipping is also free) at: <https://bereavement.newyorklifestore.com/index.php/store/category/46/0/0/>

PDF copies in 7 other languages can be downloaded at:

<https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/loved-one-dies>.

It was written by the same authors of this booklet and contains further information, including advice on how to support older children.

eluna maintains a listing of local children's bereavement programs/centers, camps and hospice programs at:

<https://elunanetwork.org/national-bereavement-resource-guide/resources/> which you can use to find resources near you.

You can also speak with your pediatrician or other pediatric healthcare provider, your children's preschool/school teacher or other staff in the school for additional local resources.





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In the end, it is most important that children recognize that the important adults in their lives love them and are trying their best to help. They will forgive, even if they don't always forget, the small "mistakes" we all make when dealing with death and other difficult topics.

If you are reading this booklet in the midst of your own grief, you are already taking a big step to help your children. It may be a lot to take in.

Come back again when you are ready.





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