

# Talking to Children About Dying, Death, and Grief

Information for  
Parents and Caregivers

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[www.nshealth.ca](http://www.nshealth.ca)

# Talking to Children About Dying, Death, and Grief

Caring for a grieving child can feel overwhelming, especially when you are grieving yourself. It can hurt to see them grieve, but you can help.

This pamphlet can help parents, caregivers, and trusted adults talk with children about death and grief in compassionate, honest ways that are right for their age. Simply connecting with your child can help.

Supporting a grieving child while managing your own grief can be exhausting. It is important to care for yourself as you grieve. This will help you support your child by showing them how to grieve with intention and self-compassion.

Grief is a human response to loss. **There is no right or wrong way to grieve.** Grief does not follow stages or a timeline. Children and adults experience grief differently, and these experiences can change over time.

## Grief, loss, and children

- Grief is different for each child. This will depend on:
  - › Their stage of development
  - › Their past experiences with loss

- › The support they get from their family, caregivers, and community
- While this pamphlet focuses on grief related to death, children may also grieve other losses, like:
  - › Serious illness
  - › Family separation or divorce
  - › Changes in caregiving
  - › Loss of community or culture
  - › Changes in health or identity (who they believe they are)
- **Any loss that is meaningful to a child can be grieved.** While it is natural to judge or compare different types of losses, this may cause the child to feel like their loss is not important. You can help to support them and make them feel safe to express their feelings by acknowledging their loss (recognizing how important their loss is to them).

## **How to support a grieving child**

- Children learn how to grieve by watching the adults around them. Talking openly about death and grief helps children understand that their feelings and questions are normal. It does not help to try to protect children by avoiding grief or hiding your emotions.

- Seeing adults grieve openly can help make children more comfortable with their feelings.
  - › For example, if you need to tell your child that their parent is going to die, you may be scared you will start to cry or get overwhelmed. Sharing your feelings shows children that emotions are part of being human and that they are not alone in their grief.
- Children are not hurt by seeing strong emotions. Showing and talking about your emotions helps children feel safe to share theirs.

## **Talking with children about death**

- Children are curious and have a lot of questions about illness and death. Keep them updated on the basic details of how their family member or friend is doing.
- Children can tell when their parents or caregivers are upset. They notice:
  - › How their parents act
  - › Their parents' body language and tone of voice
  - › Feelings of adult worry and concern
- Tell your child about the person's health changes and that these changes are caused by the illness and its treatments. Use clear, simple words to explain each new change.

## What to say and what to avoid

- When a person dies, tell your child using clear, simple, and honest language. Explain that the person's body has stopped working and that they will not come back to life.
- Many adults worry about saying the wrong thing. Simple, honest, compassionate words are often enough.
- **Helpful things to say:**
  - › Explain that the person who died will not be coming back to life.
  - › Tell your child about the person's body and what happens to it when they die.
    - › "Their heart doesn't beat, their ears don't hear, and their body doesn't move anymore."
    - › Children often think of the body as being separate from the head. When talking about the person's body, make sure they understand that it includes the head.
  - › Tell them that the person cannot feel anything anymore (like pain, hunger, or cold).
  - › Answer any questions they may have, like "Were they in pain?"
    - › Answer as truthfully as you can, in ways that match your child's age and understanding.

- **Things to avoid:**
  - › Do not compare death to sleep. This can be confusing.
- It is OK to say things that reflect your beliefs about what happens after death.
- It may help to talk about a past loss your child remembers, like the death of a pet or another person. This can help them understand that death is permanent.
- It can also help for a child to see the person after death. This can help them understand that the body has stopped working and may lower their fear over time. For some children, this helps death feel like a natural part of life.

## **Children coping with serious illness and dying**

### **Make time to talk**

- When a family member or friend is seriously ill, it can be hard to find time to talk about it with your child. Children do not always have the words they need to tell adults about their feelings and ask questions. Make time to talk with your child.
  - › For example, ask your child how they are doing while snuggling at bedtime, or during meals or car rides.

- Many children will avoid asking questions because they are scared of upsetting others or making the situation worse. It is important that you start and keep up these discussions.
- Children often have common worries when someone they care about is very sick or dying. Some examples include the ‘6 Cs’<sup>1</sup>:
  - › What is it **called**?
  - › Can I **catch** it?
  - › Did I **cause** it?
  - › Can I **cure** it?
  - › Who will take **care** of me?
  - › How can I stay **connected** with them?
- Children may not ask these questions directly. Offering clear, simple, and honest information can help lower their fear and confusion. It is important to talk with them using language they can understand and keep them updated about changes as they happen.
- Giving children honest information regularly can help them understand what they are seeing and hearing. Talk about the things that your child might notice, like:
  - › Weight loss
  - › Coughing
  - › Changes in skin colour
  - › People being awake at night
  - › Hair loss
  - › Confusion

1. [www.sickkids.ca/siteassets/care--services/support-services/paediatric-advanced-care-team-pact/talking-to-kids-about-serious-illness.pdf](http://www.sickkids.ca/siteassets/care--services/support-services/paediatric-advanced-care-team-pact/talking-to-kids-about-serious-illness.pdf)

- They may wonder whether the person will get better or not. Talk with your child as things change. Be honest with them about what the changes mean.

## **Visiting the hospital or hospice**

- Sometimes, a child's excitement and energy can be tiring or overwhelming. Plan for your child to have something to do during the visit. They can share quiet toys, drawing paper, and other simple activities with the person you are visiting. Your child may also wish to share their favourite take-out lunch or dinner with the person.
- Be ready to leave when your child's mood or behaviour shows you that they are ready to go.

## **Should children be around when someone is dying?**

- As a parent or guardian, you can choose how much your child is involved when the person is dying. If your child cannot be there, try including them in a video call or taking photos for them.
- Let them know that it is OK to show how they feel, and that they should not try to hide their grief.



- It is usually OK for children to be present for dying and death. Some ways to include them are:
  - › Making the person a card
  - › Holding hands with the person
  - › Placing a blanket on the person
  - › Singing the person a song or talking with them
  - › Simply being with the person, even if they are playing on their own
- If a child cannot or does not want to be present for dying and death, they can also:
  - › Make a card
  - › Record a video
  - › Call on the phone or by video
  - › Give an object (like a stuffed animal) to the people who will be visiting the person. These objects tend to represent their presence and are a way for them to offer compassion and comfort to others and themselves.
- It can help to plan how you could respond to questions your child may have.

## **Culture, spirituality, and meaning**

- Grief, death, and mourning are understood and expressed differently across cultures, faiths, families, and communities. Some children and families find comfort in rituals, prayer, ceremony, storytelling, creativity, nature, or community gatherings. Others may not.
- Ask what practices, beliefs, or supports feel meaningful and respectful for your child and their family.
- Children may also have big questions about fairness, meaning, or what happens after death. These questions can change over time, and it is OK if you do not have all the answers.

## **Including children in dying, death, and rituals**

- Children can be included in dying, death, and rituals in ways that feel right for them. Some may want to be present, while others may not. You do not need to force them to take part. Offering choices helps children feel respected and safe.
- **Some ways to include children are:**
  - › Making a card
  - › Holding hands
  - › Singing
  - › Sharing memories
  - › Helping to choose clothes or music, or making art

- It may help to lower your child's fear if you tell them ahead of time what they may see or hear.

## Getting ready for rituals, funerals, memorials, or celebrations of life

- After a death, it is common to have some form of ritual that shows the significance of the loss. Some examples include:
  - › **Funeral:** a formal ceremony held shortly after death with the body present (either in a casket or an urn). It often follows religious or cultural traditions and may include readings, prayers, and a service.
  - › **Celebration of life:** a personalized, often less formal gathering focused on honouring the person's life. It may happen with or without the body present.
  - › **Memorial service:** a ceremony held without the body present (typically after burial or cremation). It may be formal or informal and can resemble a funeral in structure.
  - › **Wake or visitation:** a social gathering (often before a funeral) where people pay their respects, often with the body present. It is usually less formal and lets the family and community visit, share stories, and support one another.

- Some parents and caregivers choose not to include their children in these rituals, while others consider it important to include them. Children can be involved in ways that feel right for them, like helping to choose the casket or urn, writing or speaking, singing, or taking part in other parts of the service.
- Before a funeral, memorial service, visitation, or wake, explain to your child what will happen, who will be there, and how people may act (like expressing their emotions by crying). Tell your child what role they will have, if any. You know your child best and can decide how involved they will be.
- If there will be an open casket, explain that the person's body will be there so people can say goodbye, and that the casket is used to bury the body. If the person was cremated, you can explain that the person's body was burned and what will happen to their ashes.

## **Trauma and grief**

- If a death or loss was sudden, scary, or involved an upsetting experience, the child may experience trauma as well as grief. They may:
  - › Have trouble sleeping
  - › Feel jumpy or on edge

- › Avoid things or places that remind them of what happened
- › Feel numb (not feel anything) or overwhelmed (like they cannot handle what is happening)
- **It is important to try to help them feel safe.**  
It may help to follow a routine, reassure them, give them choices, and let them share at their own pace. It may help to get more support if their grief is:
  - › Very strong
  - › Not getting better or getting worse
  - › Affecting their daily life
- For more information about trauma and grief, ask a member of your health care team for pamphlet 2517, *Coping with Grief and Trauma: When Tragedy Turns Life Upside Down*, scan the QR code below, or visit:
  - › [www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2517](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2517)

Scan the QR code on your device (open the camera on your device, point the camera at the code, and tap the banner or border that appears)



## Children and ongoing grief

- Children often grieve in short bursts, moving between expressing their emotions and playing. They tend to process loss slowly over time and think more about it as their understanding develops.
- Loss can make a child feel like they are not safe. Some behaviours (like repeating things) may be their way of trying to make sense of what is happening, not because they do not understand what they are doing.
- Children often express grief through their behaviour instead of their words. This may include behaviour changes, physical complaints, anger, or being clingy.
- For example:
  - › Playing a game and suddenly becoming quiet, expressing emotion and missing the person, then going back to playing a little while later
  - › Including the dead person in their play and activity
  - › Drawing, then suddenly scribbling over the page in anger about the dead person
  - › More irritability or sudden anger during routine changes (like homework time or during meals)

- › Asking if the person is “coming back” even after you have told them they are not
- › Waiting until just before bed to ask about the death and how it happened instead of asking earlier in the day
- › Not wanting to go to school, or wanting someone to go with them when they often went by themselves
- › At certain times of the day (like before school and at bedtime), having changes in their appetite (how much they want to eat), changes in their sleep patterns, feeling very tired or having body aches and pains
- Grief does not end after the funeral. To help children feel connected and supported over time:
  - › Keep talking about the person
  - › Share memories about the person
  - › Keep reminders of the person (like pictures)
- It is natural for people of all ages to want to keep a bond with a loved one who has died. This can help them cope with loss and grief.

## **Keep talking with your child about the person who died**

- Grief does not follow a timeline and it is not something you “get over.” This is true for both children and adults. Grief changes us, and there is no cure for it. You cannot take away your child’s grief, but you can support them through it.
- Children will need to talk about their thoughts and feelings long after the person’s death. Keep talking openly about the person who died and share your own memories and feelings. This will help your child learn that their feelings are normal and that they are not responsible for your grief.
- Try asking your child where they feel different emotions in their body or ask them to draw what a feeling looks like. This can help them understand and express their grief.
- Keeping reminders of the person can also be comforting. Some children may want to keep photos or special objects, like clothes. Finding ways to remember the person on birthdays or holidays can help children feel connected.

## **A child’s grief is different than an adult’s**

- Children often grieve differently than adults. They may also not understand the impact of the loss right away.



- It is normal for children to show grief in bursts, including anger, guilt, fear, or being clingy. These reactions and behaviours are often strongest at home and with the remaining caregiver.
- **It can help to:**
  - › Explain the difference between what caused the person's death and other illnesses
  - › Reassure them while being honest about uncertainty
- Reassure, nurture, and encourage your child. Ask trusted adults (like teachers, coaches, school counsellors, or the social worker on your loved one's health care team) for support finding resources or see the **Support from others and developmental considerations** section on page 17.

## **Children's worries about illness and death**

- After a death, children may be worried about illness and dying. They may ask if or when others will die, or worry about their own death. This anxiety often shows up in their bodies as headaches or stomach aches. They may also feel like these symptoms are like those of the person who died.

- Respond with patience, reassurance, and understanding. Tell your child that you are healthy and that they do not have the same illness as the person who died.
- Grief is different for each person. Each person grieves in their own way in response to what a loss means to them. It may help to do physical activity with your child, listen and talk to them, or share memories or look at photos of the person who died.
- If your child's anxiety does not get better with time and support, you may want to talk to their primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner).
- It is also important to experience your own grief and get support for yourself, as needed. This will help you to be able to care for your child.

## **Support from others and developmental considerations**

- Tell important adults in your child's life (like their teachers, principals, coaches, or group leaders) about the person's death. As children grow, they often look to other adults for support, reassurance, and stability.

Children's understanding of death changes as they grow:

- **Pre-school children** (2 to 4 years old) may believe they caused events and need reassurance that they are not responsible for your grief. If they see that you are very upset, they may think that they are the cause of your grief. You can help them to feel less anxious by explaining carefully and often that this is not true.
  - › They may feel anxious when separated from their caregivers. Simple explanations and routines can help. Remember that they may be visiting new places (like a hospital) and meeting new people (like doctors and nurses). Remember to ask if they have any questions.
  - › For a list of resources you can use to help your child learn about these new situations, see the **Resources** section on page 20.
- **School-aged children** (4 to 12 years old) may understand more about cause and effect, but still feel responsible for the loss. Grief often shows up as behavior changes because they are easily overwhelmed by their emotional responses and thoughts.

- › For example, you may notice that a confident child is now anxious and resistant, cries, and has stomachaches when you take them to school. Talk to your child's teacher about helping them express their feelings and making sure they feel safe when you are not with them.
- › Your child may feel excluded or disconnected because caregiving is so demanding. Try to spend special time alone with them and tell them often why you are leaving them.
- › Include your child in your grief. Show and tell them how you feel and what you do with your grief. This will help them understand their own feelings and how to express them. They may want to express their feelings through creative play, drawing, or storytelling.
- **Pre-teens and teenagers (11 to 18 years old)** understand that death is final, but may still be in denial at times. This is a normal part of grieving.
  - › Encourage them to talk, while respecting their need for privacy. All children and youth tend to watch others closely to learn what they should feel and how to grieve. It is important to help them feel safe to express their grief, as needed.

- › They are often curious and will appreciate clear, honest information, like:
  - › What happens to the person's body when they die
  - › Whether the person was in pain
  - › What the person's body looks and feels like
  - › What will happen to their body at the funeral home, or during cremation or burial
  - › How they can be involved in the funeral or celebration of life, if they choose to
- **At every age, it is important for children to hear that grief is a normal response to loss, even though it can be painful.** Support your child in reaching out to their community for care and connection.

## Resources

### Kids and teens grief

#### KidsGrief.ca

- › <https://kidsgrief.ca/>

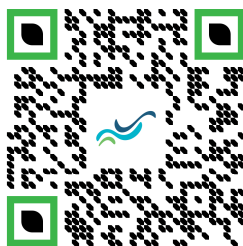
#### • Kids Help Phone

- › Phone (toll-free): 1-800-668-6868
- › Text: CONNECT to 686868
- › <https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

## **Grief and coping**

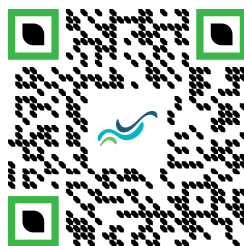
### ***Let's Talk About Grief***

- › [www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2516](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2516)



### ***Coping with Grief and Trauma: When Tragedy Turns Life Upside Down***

- › [www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2517](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/2517)



## **Canadian Alliance for Children's Grief**

- › <https://grievingchildrencanada.org/>

### **About Grief**

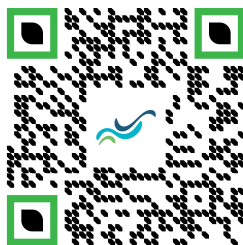
- Canadian Grief Alliance
  - › [www.aboutgrief.ca](http://www.aboutgrief.ca)

## **Children and Youth Grief Network**

- › [www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com](http://www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com)

### ***Helping Teens Cope with Dying, Death, and Loss***

- › [www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/1738](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/1738)



## **Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children and Families**

- › [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

## **Life Changes**

- Nova Scotia Health
  - › [www.nshealth.ca/lifechanges](http://www.nshealth.ca/lifechanges)

## **To find grief support in your area:**

- › Visit [www.nshealth.ca](http://www.nshealth.ca) and search “grief”

## **Bereavement Support Services - IWK Health**

- › <https://iwkhealth.ca/clinics-programs-services/bereavement-support-services>

## **211 Nova Scotia**

- › Phone: 211
- › Phone (toll-free): 1-855-466-4994
- › Visit <https://ns.211.ca> and search “grief support”

## **Healing Pathways – Grieving Well™**

- Nova Scotia Hospice Palliative Care Association
  - › <https://grievingwell.nshpca.ca>

## **You may also find support from:**

- › School counsellors or trusted teachers
- › Primary health care providers
- › Cultural or spiritual supports
- › Community grief programs

**Reaching out is a sign of care and connection, not failure.**

## **If it is an emergency:**

- **Call the Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line** 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:
  - › Phone (toll-free): 1 888 429 8167
  - › Phone: 902-429-8167

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:  
[www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources)

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:  
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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