

A RESOURCE
FROM
NAGC
MEMBERS



National Alliance for
Grieving Children

TALKING ABOUT GRIEVING AS A FAMILY





Grief Talk is an initiative of the NAGC launched in the summer of 2020 aimed at encouraging and supporting honest conversations around the topics of death and grief. This initiative has produced the following resources:

Talking to Children About Death and Dying
Talking to a Child or Teen to Let them know Someone has Died
Talking about End of Life Memorials and Rituals
Talking about Grieving as a Family

Visit ChildrenGrieve.org to find these and other resources.

Thank you to the following NAGC member organizations and individuals who contributed the content for this resource: (Listed alphabetically by last name. Highlighted names designate the lead authors for this guide.)

Erin Brodbeck, LCSW, CT, Director of Grief Services, Sunset Funeral Homes (Champaign, IL)
Karina Castillo, LCSW, Children's Grief Support Program Manager, Community Hospice (Modesto, CA)
Colleen Cherry, Founder, PlayWell Child Life Services (Laguna Niguel, CA)
Alyssa Christensen, Grief Support Director, Mourning Hope Grief Center (Lincoln, Nebraska)
Lauren Clarke, Program Manager, Bridges for End-of-Life (Charleston, SC)
Lisa Conn, MSW, LISW-S, CAPT, Bereavement Counseling Professional, Ohio's Hospice of Dayton (Dayton, OH)
Pamela Gabbay, EdD, FT, Co-Founder, The Satori Group (Virginia Beach, VA)
Peggy Galimberti, LMSW- Clinical, ACSW, Program Director, Ele's Place (Ann Arbor, MI)
Heather Gianatassio, Certified Child Life Specialist and Grief Counselor
Melissa Lunardini, MA, MBA, CEO, Radical Grief, LLC (San Diego, CA)
Valerie Myers MS, CT, CEO, Myers Compassionate Grief Services, LLC (Owings Mills, MD)
Kaela O'Donnell, MSW, LCSWA, Program Therapist, KinderMourn (Charlotte, NC)
Buffy Peters, Director, Hamilton's Academy of Grief & Loss (Des Moines, Iowa)
Irwin Sandler, Research Professor, Resilient Parenting for Bereaved Families (Phoenix, AZ)
Corrie Sirota MSW, PSW, Clinical Social Worker & Psychotherapist, Author and Clinical Director of Myra's Kids Foundation (Montreal, Quebec)
Blair Stockton, MS, CCLS, CTP, CGCS, Compass Child and Teen Grief Services Coordinator, Four Seasons Hospice and Palliative Care (Flat Rock, NC)

Copyright © 2020 by National Alliance for Grieving Children. All rights reserved. You can quote, link to, repost or translate this article, in its entirety, as long as you credit the NAGC and add a working link back to the NAGC's website. www.ChildrenGrieve.org



Provide Honest And Accurate Information

When talking to anyone about death and dying, a good rule of thumb is to talk simply, honestly, and with love. Remember to get down to their level and find a quiet and comfortable location to begin the conversation.

Use accurate words such as “died, death, death by suicide, or they died of leukemia - which is a type of cancer, for example.”

Once you have shared the information (using vocabulary they can understand), then let the child(ren) and teen be your guide with questions. It’s OK to say, “That’s a great question, I don’t know the answer, perhaps we can ask

someone together?” or you can wonder with them.

Children tend to handle things better when adults are honest and upfront with them. When you don’t talk to them about what they see, you leave it up to them to make up their own stories in their heads (which can often be worse than reality).

Furthermore, even when we keep secrets, the truth will likely come out at some point, so wouldn’t you rather they hear it from you?

Given that this time is the creation of the next phase of life without the person who died, it will prove helpful to begin this time honestly and with the most accurate information possible.



Remember: Be honest.

Children tend to handle things better when adults are honest and upfront with them.



“

...the truth will likely
come out at some
point...wouldn't you
rather they hear it
from you?

Validate, Normalize And Educate On Grief

Given that each family member has a unique relationship with the person who died, everyone will incorporate the loss into their life differently, and their grief responses will vary. It is important to respect and honor the unique responses of each member of the family.

You can do this by using a 3 L's (Look, Listen, and Learn) approach. LOOK at how each family member expresses themselves, LISTEN for their unique feelings and thoughts, and LEARN more by asking questions.

When children and teens feel validated and heard in their own family, this can empower them to share their story with others.

LOOK
LISTEN
LEARN

Coping Skills

Coping skills are behaviors or actions that we take to relieve stress and deal with a death loss. Within a family, we may see a variety of healthy and unhealthy coping strategies.

Unhealthy coping behaviors tend to feel good in the moment and may seem to offer relief from the problem or emotion.



Activity: Make a Story M.A.P.

One of the ways to prepare a child to share is by the use of a "Story M.A.P." This is the process of learning to tell the story of the death through Modeling, Accuracy and Practice. Adults should model how they tell others about the death so children can hear the language their parent or caregiver uses.

Modeling can help ensure a child's understanding of what happened; it also provides accurate information. Practicing helps children become emotionally comfortable with telling their story before they share it with others.

Healthy coping can often help improve mood and decrease anxiety as well as normalize the experience. Unhealthy coping skills tend to bring negative consequences and may be illegal or dangerous, whereas healthy coping strategies promote positive healing.



Talking with family members about coping strategies can be very helpful in creating a supportive environment in which growth and healing are encouraged.

Each individual within a family may cope very differently with the death. Some family members may find it helpful and comforting to have photos of the deceased displayed while others may find it difficult. Some may show outward signs of grief, while others may be more private. Some may need to talk about the person who died, and others may find it too painful.

Often within a family, it may feel like everyone is on different pages when it comes to coping with the loss.

These variances in coping can have an impact on other family members.

It is important to respect the differences in coping strategies within your family and encourage each member of the family to rely on the coping strategies that work best for them.

EXAMPLES OF HEALTHY COPING SKILLS

LISTENING TO MUSIC

EXERCISE

COLOR, PAINT, OR DRAW

TALKING TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST



Grief is different for different people.

What is helpful for one person, may or may not be helpful for someone else.



Each individual within a family may cope very differently with the death.

Cultural Norms Impact Grief

Cultural norms influence how family members react to a death loss. Every culture has its own customs, beliefs, and ways of expressing grief. Rituals and traditions can provide a sense of normalcy, routine, and structure.

Culture can provide a framework for families for how to cope once someone has died. For example, many cultures' common tradition is wearing black clothing to demonstrate a family is grieving.

This tradition can provide families a sense of unity and togetherness that is vital during the grieving process. In essence, cultural beliefs can help families cope and bring a sense of comfort and normalcy to the grieving process.

Establish Routine, Roles, And Safety

It may seem as though everything changes when a loved one dies. Developing new routines may seem counter-intuitive, yet they may serve to help offer some sense of normalcy in what may be an otherwise a very chaotic situation.



Activity: Identify Healthy Coping Strategies and Tools

Spend some time as a family coming up with a list of healthy coping tools that you can do as a group, by yourself, or one on one. Now place the list somewhere everyone can access it and help remind each other to use the list when our feelings get a little too big or when you just need to take a break. This activity offers family members the opportunity to teach each other healthy coping tools that work for them.

Asking for your children's input about how they would like to move forward can be a wonderful way of giving them some control over a situation that may otherwise feel very uncontrollable. The parent/caregiver/guardian is encouraged to engage children and teens in the process of deciding new routines as this can truly open up some interesting conversations that you may not otherwise have had.

The death of a loved one has an impact on every person related to the deceased. Bereaved families can find that roles that once existed are no longer the same (how do you stop being a sibling? A parent? An aunt? or a cousin?) It is important to acknowledge these changes in roles (and equally important to talk about how that makes each of you feel) while remembering that death may end a life, but it does not have to end the relationship.

There is a certain vulnerability that occurs when a loved one dies. This can be especially true for children. It is not uncommon to see and hear children worry about a caregiver's health, their own physical safety, and how their environment has changed.

Children need to be asked questions such as "What do you need to feel safe?" or "What has helped you feel safe in the past?" Offering suggestions can be helpful as children often don't know what they need to feel safe (i.e. night light, leaving the door open).

This is a great time to discuss how the whole family can address fears and coping strategies that can help them feel safe and secure moving forward. This includes safety plans, safe words, and identifying people on whom they can rely.

**Activity: Establish a Routine and Rules**

Establishing routine can be difficult after a death. You must participate as a family in setting new house rules and expectations. This could involve deciding what new rules are needed, what we will keep, and what rules don't make sense anymore. Work together to establish your house rules and take the time to review them periodically. This activity will help family members understand what is expected and accepted within the family unit.



The death of a loved one has an impact on every person related to the deceased.





Bereaved children do best in a family that has established structure, boundaries, and discipline.



Establish Boundaries And Discipline Around Behavioral Challenges

After someone in their life dies, one of the first things that happens is the loss of predictability. Bereaved children do best in a family that has established structure, boundaries, and discipline. After someone has died, parents and caregivers often wonder whether they should discipline their child or teen in the same way they did previously. Children who are bereaved need structure, routine and discipline.

Maintaining family expectations and structure enables children and teens to feel more secure within themselves and their family, and, thus, more comforted. Death brings so many shattered beliefs about how the world

works and the predictability of life. As a result, bereaved children and teens need structure more than ever.

While keeping the family rules and expectations, it is also very important to allow for exceptions. Bereaved children are often struggling with their own emotions and how to cope with everything that is going on all around them. They might act out as a way of showing their emotions, including anger, sadness, worry, and frustration. When parents and guardians show understanding and compassion, this enables a grieving child the freedom to explore their feelings in ways that are healthier for the child and the entire family.



Activity: Learn to Name Feelings

When children are unable to find the words to describe the big feelings they may have, it can cause frustration. Together as a family, play feelings charades. Work together to come up with as many feeling words as you can think of.

As you are listing them, make sure that each member of the family understands that each word means. Now take turns playing feelings charades and guessing what feeling each family member is acting out. Leave the list out in a common area where it can be used as needed. This activity helps children name the big emotions they may be experiencing.



How Families Support Each Other

Ensuring that everyone in the family is feeling supported can often feel like a juggling act. This is why establishing communication early on can help to create a supportive environment.

This may include addressing how families will communicate through the following topics:

- When is it appropriate to do grief check-ins?

- When and how a family addresses conflict, concerns, or differences.
- How will a family determine if someone needs space or additional support?
- Families should keep the lines of communication open and transparent or confidential when necessary.
- Establish some verbal and nonverbal ways to communicate that additional support is needed.

Having these discussions (even though they may be difficult) can help create emotional awareness and expectations for how each family member will communicate with one another. It is also important to recognize that these family-based communication styles can act as a guideline that may change and evolve over time based on each family's needs.



Activity: Check In

There are many ways to check in with your kids to see how they are doing. You can do this as a family unit, or one on one with each child. This can be as simple as asking, "What are you excited about?" and "What are you worried about?" "What are you looking forward to?" and "What are you not looking forward to?"

You can change the question daily but give the child an opportunity to talk about the good things and the not so good things. This activity builds in opportunities for the child to discuss topics that otherwise might be hard for them to bring up.

Supporting families through milestones, events, ceremonies, or honoring and remembering

Bereaved children and teens should be included in milestones, events, and ceremonies that involve honoring or remembering the person or people in their lives who have died. This helps them stay connected to their person in a way that is very meaningful and beneficial to coping and healing. One of the things that children understand is that people may die, but their love for them never dies.

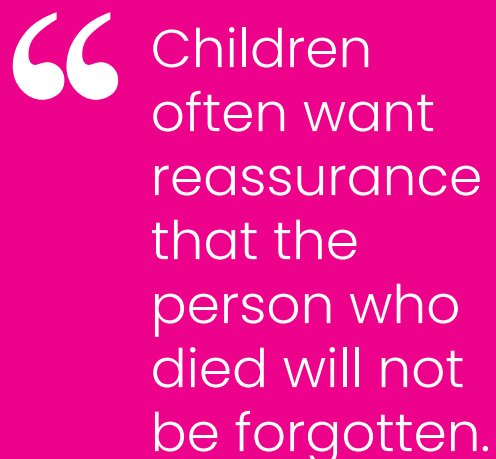
It is not unusual for children to talk to the person who has died, or to wonder what advice their person would give them now, as they are growing up. Staying connected can bring immense comfort to them. Children often want reassurance that the person who died will not be forgotten.

When deciding how to remember or honor the person who died, invite children to give input about what would be meaningful to them. If it is taking flowers somewhere special, ask children to help pick out the flowers. If it is a birthday or special day that the family is remembering, ask the children how they would like to celebrate.

Sometimes, parents might have to provide some suggestions. Going to the person's favorite restaurant or making the person's favorite meal are two examples of helpful suggestions.

Encouraging input from all members of the family can be very supportive. This is important because there will most likely be differences in how children in the family want to honor or remember the person who died as every child had their own unique relationship with the person.

Additionally, each child or teen in the family will be coping differently and, therefore, some rituals will be comforting or meaningful to one child, but not necessarily the other. This is why asking for their input is so important. Remember that cultural differences should always be taken into consideration.



“Children often want reassurance that the person who died will not be forgotten.”

When to seek additional support

After a death, it is important to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional.



Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideation

These changes can have an impact on the griever and the other family members. When changes in behavior go unnoticed and unaddressed, this can create an imbalance within the family. Addressing these changes will help create a supportive and safe environment for each member of the family.

Sometimes members in a family may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or even another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows the griever to share their story, understand that they are not alone, validate and normalize their experience. It is important to embrace a family members' readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional support in your area by visiting [childrengrieve.org/find-support](https://www.childrengrieve.org/find-support).



Learn more at www.ChildrenGrieve.org