



Supporting Grieving Children

When a loved one dies, it can be hard to know where to even begin. You may be feeling like your grief is too big to handle, or that you have to put it aside to support your child/children in their grief. If this is your child's first loss, it may be hard to know what are "normal" reactions to grief. If you have more than one child, you may notice that they are reacting differently. We at the Wendt Center want to support you in this process. This tip sheet includes information about grief responses in children under the age of 12 and activities you can try to help support them.

First, let's address some myths about children and grief:

Myth 1: Children are too young to remember or experience grief.

Fact: All children are affected by grief in some way. There is no standard response to grief in children and often people in the same family grieve and express grief in very different ways.

Myth 2: Grief is time limited. Children will bounce back fast or finish grieving within a year.

Fact: Grief is a lifelong process; we don't "get over" grief, we learn to live with grief. It will look different at each life stage, and developmental milestones may reopen intense feelings of grief in ways that are unexpected.

Myth 3: Children who aren't crying aren't grieving.

Fact: It is normal and healthy for children to move in between grief and joy responses.

Reactions to grief

A child's response to a grief event will vary based on their age and stage of development. It is common for children to revisit their grief at each new stage of development. Understanding these varied reactions can be helpful. Here are some common reactions to grief, based on age:

0-3 years old: At this age, children do not understand the permanence of death, yet they are very aware that something significant has happened. They can express a lot of confusion about why the deceased person isn't present: asking repeated questions or even temper tantrums. Often their primary concern is "who will take care of me" and this may be communicated through increased separation anxiety with the caregiver and regression of previous behaviors (bed wetting, thumb sucking, etc.).

4-7 years old: The struggle with understanding the permanence of death and asking of repeated questions often continues with this age group. Children may engage in "magical thinking:" believing that their thoughts or feelings are responsible for the death of their loved one. Anger and sadness are common emotions and may be expressed through challenging behaviors and difficulty with sleeping.

8-11 years old: Children are starting to understand the permanence of death at this age. They may try to avoid talking about the death and express feelings of anger and sadness. Somatic complaints such as headaches and stomachaches are common. Children at this age may share that they want to go be with the person who died. It is important to distinguish between a wish to be with the person who died and actively thinking of how to hurt themselves. Children may have suicidal thoughts at this age, and these thoughts should be taken seriously.

How to support grieving kids

It can be difficult for children to find the words to express how they are feeling; grief often has no words. By inviting children to express themselves, adults allow children to share in ways that feel more comfortable and natural. Use

drawing, music, play, and reading to allow kids to express their emotions. Here are some ways you can help your child express their grief reactions:

Expressing Big Feelings: These ideas can help children manage big and uncomfortable emotions

- Take some breaths:
 - o Take 5 - Hold one hand out in front of you. Take your pointer finger on your other hand and trace the outline of the hand in front of you. As you trace up your finger, breathe in; and as you trace down your finger, breathe out. Repeat as needed.
 - o Square breaths - Breathe in for 4, Hold your breath for 4, Breathe out for 4, and Hold your breath for 4. Repeat as needed.
 - o Balloon breaths – Blow your big feelings into the balloon, make it as big as needed and then let it go and watch it release the big feelings. Do as many times as needed.
- Have a snowball fight:
 - o Grab several pieces of paper.
 - o On each sheet of paper, write down one thing that is upsetting you/stressing you out.
 - o Scrunch each piece of paper into a ball.
 - o Have a snowball fight by tossing the pieces of paper with each other.
 - o Optional – At the end of your snowball fight, unravel each piece of paper and talk about what is written.
- Animal yoga:
 - o Choose various animals and imagine how these animals would create shapes and move their bodies.
 - o Use the animals to express emotions: roar like a lion, curl up into a shell like a turtle, or stretch like a cat.

Being Creative:

- Draw how you are feeling today; use lines, shapes, or just color. This isn't about creating pretty pictures but putting on paper what is on the inside.
- Create a collage. It can focus on what has changed since the death of your loved one or things you miss about your loved one.
- Make a mindfulness jar
 - o You will need an empty water bottle, water, clear glue, glitter.
 - o Pour some water into the bottle. Next, pour some glue into the water bottle. The more glue you add, the slower the glitter will move. Fill up the remainder of the bottle with water. Glue the inside of the lid and then close your water bottle.
 - o When things are feeling out of control, give your mindfulness jar a shake and watch the glitter as it falls to the bottom of the bottle.

Remember and Honor Your Loved One

- Cook your loved one's favorite recipe.
- Create a memory box (decorate the outside and fill the inside with objects that remind you of your loved one or pictures of special occasions).
- Create a playlist of your loved one's favorite songs.

[Wendt Center for Loss and Healing](#) is the Greater Washington region's premier resource for restoring hope and healthy functioning to adults, teens, and children who are coping with grief, loss, and trauma. Wendt Center Training Institute offers customized, trauma-informed [workshops](#) and [certifications](#) that equip mental health and allied professionals with skills to address grief, loss, and trauma in the communities in which they work and live.