



Talking to Kids about Grief

Supporting children who have experienced the death of someone important can feel overwhelming and confusing. What do you say? How much do you share? How do I support them when I am struggling? We at the Wendt Center want to give you some information to make that process feel less overwhelming.

Often, caregivers do not know where to begin when sharing news of a loved one's death with a child. This can lead to a range of responses in adults from avoiding talking about the death to try protect or not upset the child, to pressuring conversations in attempts to fix the pain. When adults avoid the conversation it sends the message that discussion of grief is not allowed; When adults pressure conversation, it does not allow children the chance to engage in the natural oscillation between pain and restorative activities. Below are some suggestions on how to structure and pace this process.



Build safety and trust: the death of a loved one can shatter a child's sense of safety in the world.

- Find small ways to help a child feel in control.
- Often children can only tolerate short discussions around grief. Let them know it's okay to ask questions at a later point.
- It's okay to say "I don't know" to questions. Offer to gather more information if possible.

Avoid euphemisms and provide reassurance: children don't have advanced language to understand euphemisms. These phrases were designed to make adults feel better by avoiding the word death. With children, we need to step into the discomfort and use clear language to avoid confusion.

- Provide clear, concise, age-appropriate explanations. Avoid common phrases such as "passed away" and "went to sleep" as this may confuse children and lead to an increase in fears or anxieties.
- Clearly explain what death means. For example: "When someone dies their body has stopped working and they can't do things such as eat, sleep, watch television, etc. They won't come back."
- It is also important to share that the loved one does not feel pain after they have died.

- Listen and reassure them about safety. You cannot promise them that no one else will die, but you can assure children that you are doing what is needed to keep them and yourself safe. Provide concrete examples when possible.
- Reassure children that the death was not their fault.
- Do not lie about the cause of death. Children may overhear conversations between adults.

Share about your grief experiences: Children learn from adults all the time.

- Sharing about your feelings gives children permission to feel and express emotions.
- Sharing about your feelings can give a child the confidence to talk about their own emotions.
- Sharing about your feelings helps increase a child's capacity to feel uncomfortable feelings.

Maintain clear expectations and boundaries

- It might feel hard to enforce rules while children are actively grieving. Allow space for flexibility but also, to the extent possible, maintain consistency in children's lives. Consistent and predictable routines and boundaries help children know what is expected and feel less anxious.

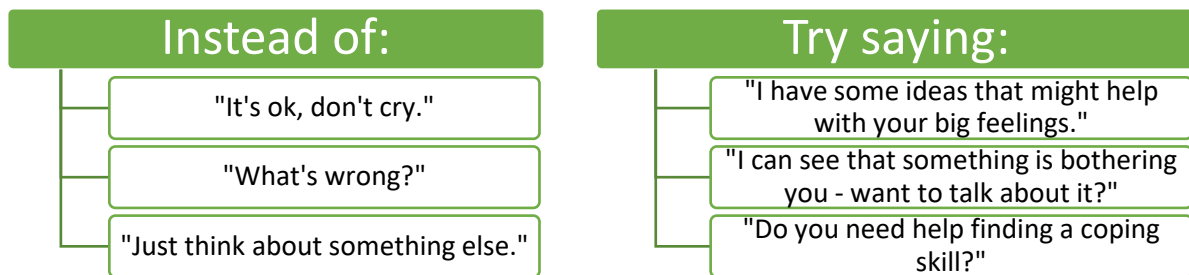
Take care of yourself

- As a caregiver, you might feel pulled to prioritize your children's needs ahead of your own. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your grief, it will be hard to be present and available for your children. Seek help and support from others.

Avoid unhelpful phrases

Many of us have learned particular phrases or responses when dealing with difficult events that actually have the potential to be harmful. Even if we have the best intentions, it is the impact on the child that really matters.

Here are a few phrases to avoid along with possible replacements:



While sometimes difficult, these conversations ensure that "no one grieves alone."

[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.