

## **Helping Children Understand Death and Grief**

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To a young child it can be difficult to understand the permanency of death. As adults, we often use the phrases “passed away”, “crossed over”, or “went to sleep”, which can be very confusing to a child. It is important for adults to use concrete words such as “death” and “died” when talking about losing a loved one.

### ***Some helpful tips:***

- Explain to your child that death is permanent and when someone dies they can't come back, no matter how much we want them to. Remember that it is okay to say “I don't know” to your child's questions.
- It's okay to show your child your grief. Try not to shy away or “get it together” for your child. It is important that they know that it is okay to be sad or cry. Remind them that they are safe and loved.
- Try not to avoid your child's questions. Encourage open communication and help them label their feelings. It is important that they feel that their feelings are validated.
- Keep daily routines. As much as possible, try and keep to your normal daily routines. Consistency and routine can feel very comforting to children.

### **Answering Tough Questions: Adapted from Sesame Street “Grief”**

**Child:** “Will I die too?”

**Parents:** “Most people live a very long time, and we can all do lots of things to take care of our bodies to help us stay healthy. Sometimes that's not enough, but I am here to love you and take care of you”.

**Child:** “Was it my fault?”

**Parents:** Remind them that nothing they did caused the death or can reverse it.

**Child:** “Is it okay to feel happy sometimes?”

**Parents:** Reassure your child that it's okay to be happy when something good happens or to laugh when something is funny. Their loved one would want them to feel happiness.

## Remembering

When young children start to develop an understanding of the permanency of death it is important to help them find ways to remember their loved one. Some children express that they fear they will forget them or that their loved one doesn't love them anymore (they "left" them). A great way to help your child through this is by creating a Memory Box.

### **Memory Box:**

- Help your child find small items, pictures, or help them create their own crafts to put into a special box.
- Explain to them that although their loved one will not be able to see this box, they will always know how much they loved them.
- Help your child decorate the box and put it away in a safe place. When your child asks, bring the box down to go through together.

## Outward Expressions of Grief

As your child is working through his or her grief they may show it by their actions rather than their words. Some common outward expressions include:

- **Regression.** Some children might regress for a time to a younger self. Often, children feel safer and comforted being in this state.
- **Aggression.** Other children may act out aggressively towards parents or other loved ones. Children can sometimes feel angry that their loved one "left them" because they didn't care about them or they were mad at them.

Remember to continue to help your child label their feelings and reassure them that they are normal. Encourage them to use words rather than actions, however, tread lightly in reprimanding during this difficult time. (The exception would be aggression that turns unsafe).

## Helpful Resources

- Sesame Street Workshop has articles and videos to help children and families understand grief. The video titled "What Happened" is a social story about Elmo understanding that his uncle died. I have found that the video is most helpful during the first 8 minutes.

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>

### **Community Resources:**

Jeff's Place Children Bereavement Center Inc. 34 Deloss Street, Framingham, MA. 01702  
(508) 879-2800

Children's Room 1210 Massachusetts Avenue, Arlington, MA. 02476 (781) 641-4741