

## Dealing with Grief

*We experience grief whenever we have a loss in our life.*

Throughout life we experience many losses, some large and some small. Whenever we have a loss, we experience grief in some form.

*Grief is when we miss and want back someone or something we have lost.*

Grief is a normal reaction to loss. Both adults and children experience feelings of grief.

*People of all ages feel grief when they have a loss in their life.*

Adults sometimes think that children do not experience feelings of grief, but even babies feel loss and show signs of grief. Children experience many losses—such as losing a favorite toy, being separated from a parent, losing a family member to death, moving to a new home or school. For children to adjust to these losses in a healthy way, they need to be able to talk about their feelings of grief.

*Children react to loss differently than adults.*

Preschool children (3-5 years of age) do not understand the permanence of losses such as death. They often keep looking for the lost person or object. Parents can gently remind children of this age that the person or object is gone for good.

Young school-age children (6-8 years of age) often feel responsible for losses. They tend to focus on the last thing they did that could have “caused” the loss. These children need reassurance that they are not responsible for losses out of their control— such as a death.

*Learn the common signs of grief.*

How a child shows his grief will be unique to him. However there are some common signs we can watch for in children. It is important to know that grieving children are not sad all the time and that even if your child is feeling grief, he will play and express joy. Play is often how children work through their emotions.

Children who have experienced a loss may:

- have trouble sleeping
- not eat well
- do poorly in school
- become clingy



- regress to earlier behaviors—such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking
- report physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches
- have many conflicting feelings at the same time

This list is just a sample of behaviors. You know your children best. The behaviors they demonstrate when upset or distressed are likely the symptoms they will show when grieving.



*Help your children learn to share their feelings of grief.*

- Be honest with children about losses in your family. If a family member dies or moves away, be honest with your child about it. Children often know more than we think. When we are dishonest with them, they are less likely to share their feelings with us.
- Be sure your child has accurate facts about the loss. If parents divorce, children need to understand that they did not cause this break-up.
- Listen actively when your child talks to you about a loss he has experienced. Focus your attention on your child, limiting as many distractions as you can. Listen for the feelings your child is expressing as well as the story about the loss. Avoid giving advice too soon. Most often children first need time to just talk about the loss and have their feelings acknowledged.
- Let your children know that whatever they are feeling is OK. Feelings are normal and natural reactions to a loss and should not be kept inside. The more your child can share his feelings with you, the better he will be able to manage and deal with those feelings.

*Be creative in helping your child deal with the loss.*

There are millions of ways that your child can express her feelings about loss. You know your child best and can help her figure out what will work for her. Here are some ideas that have worked for other children:

- Some children love to write. Your child may benefit from writing stories about her loss or writing letters to a person she has lost from her life. She can share these stories with you or even read the letters out loud imagining the person is there to hear it.
- Other children love to draw. You can encourage your child to draw about her feelings about the lost object or person. You can then use the art to talk with your child about her grief.
- Some children love music and dance and can best express themselves in this way. You and your child could write songs about the loss to the tune of a favorite song or could create dances to express the loss. If possible, record these for the child to listen to at a later time. These could then be shared with others as your child wishes.
- Some children find it helpful to create a memory album or box. You can help your children fill the album or box with items that help them remember what they have lost. Memorial albums and boxes can continue to evolve—with children continually adding to them. In this way your children can record memories they would like to have shared with a lost loved one.
- Encourage your child to be creative in finding ways to express his feelings about losses in his life.

*Teach your children how to deal with angry feelings.*

Children can feel angry when they experience a loss. Anger is a strong feeling and can scare both you and your child. Sometimes when we are scared by our child's anger, we tell them not to feel that way, "You're not angry at your dad. You love him." It is important to tell children that it is OK to be angry. We just need to help them find safe ways to express and deal with their angry feelings.

- Let your child know that feeling angry is OK and that he can talk to you about it.
- Let your child know good ways to express anger. She can play a physical sport, draw pictures about it, write stories, and/or talk to you or another trusted adult.
- Accept your child's angry feelings. "I hear how angry you are that you have to change schools again. Tell me what makes you so angry."
- Help your child develop ways to deal with the loss. Involve your child in creating ideas about what he could do to deal with the loss. If he is changing schools, how could he stay in touch with old friends, or how can he create something to help him remember them and the fun he had with them?
- If she never sees her other parent, how can she express those feelings in a creative and helpful way?

We cannot protect our children from loss but we can help them to deal with it.

*Help children learn that it's not unusual to have more than one feeling at a time.*

Children can be confused when they are angry with someone they love. After someone has left or died, children often feel many things at once. They may be angry with the person for leaving them, love that person, and feel sad that they can no longer see the person. These feelings can arise after a separation or divorce, when a parent is jailed, when a parent dies, or whenever the child is denied contact with someone they care deeply about. Tell your children that it is normal to have more than one feeling at a time. You can be angry and love someone at the same time.

*Watch for signs that your child's grief may need professional attention.*

Although grief is a normal reaction to loss, sometimes children may need the help of a professional (such as a counselor) to work through their grief. Here are some signs that may indicate that your child needs some extra help.

- Your child continually refuses to share any thoughts or feelings with you.
- Your child threatens to hurt himself or others.
- Your child refuses to leave you or other trusted adults.
- Your child no longer wants to play with friends.
- Your child begins to use drugs or alcohol.
- Your child's behaviors suddenly change (for example, suddenly fighting with everyone).
- You are very worried about your child and feel help is necessary.

Here are some places you can contact if you believe your child could use some extra help in working through his or her grief:

- Your child's school counselor
- Your child's doctor
- Your minister
- Local hotlines

## Family Grief

What affects one person in a family affects the whole family.

- If your child is grieving—then you, your other children, and other close family members are also affected.
- If you are grieving a loss, your children will be affected. We all experience losses in our lives and need to find ways to deal with them in a healthy manner. Adults do not need to hide their grief from their children—but rather they can model for their children healthy ways to grieve a loss.
- It is OK to tell your children you are sad, angry, lonely, etc. This lets them know it is OK to share feelings in your family.
- It is not OK to expect young children to take care of their parent's emotional needs. Instead tell your child who (a family member, your minister, a friend) you go to for this kind of support. This shows your child how to seek help from others.
- It is OK for you and your children to all grieve at the same time. When a family experiences a loss, everyone has a reaction to it. Families who can share their feelings with each other and accept each other's feelings are better able to handle losses that arise.
- It is OK for everyone to feel differently about a loss. What is important is that everyone's feelings are respected and accepted. There is no right way to grieve and all feelings are normal and need to be expressed. It is only when we know the feelings that we can deal with them.
- It is OK for you to seek help for yourself in dealing with your grief. Parents do not need to deny their own feelings and needs but rather can show their children that it is good to seek help when you need it. Adults, too, sometimes need help in working through their grief.



Best wishes for a good month ahead!

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Suggested citation: Park, E. Dealing with grief in Nelson. P.T.

(Ed) (2012) *Families Matter! A Series for Parents of School-Age Youth*. Newark, DE: Cooperative Extension, University of Delaware

REV0712

