



Supporting Grieving Children

“Praise be to the God and Parent of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Parent of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”
— 2 Corinthians 1:3–4

Throughout their lives, children can experience many kinds of loss — the death of family members, friends, or pets; the loss of home in a move or a natural disaster, the loss of familiarity and certainty that comes when a loved one receives a diagnosis, and others. A gift of the Christian church is that it is rich with rituals and traditions of joy, grief, and hope, as communities of faith come together to support one another, both in celebration and in grieving. As we follow the model of communities and leaders of faith across the ages and foster supportive spaces for grieving, it is important that we intentionally support the children in our community. This document provides some Biblical resources, information to help you recognize and understand grief in children, and suggestions on supporting grieving children.

Grieving in Christian stories

The Bible is rich with stories of loss and responses to loss, which you can read and share with the children in your community. You can encourage and support children by inviting them into these stories, conversations, and artistic expressions. Teach your children that grief is natural, that grief looks different for everyone, and that grieving is an important part of being human – and has been for millennia.

- There are many such stories; here are a few:
 - o The grief of Naomi: Ruth 1
 - o David’s experiences of mourning: 2 Samuel 12, 18, 19, 21
 - o Job’s story: including chapters 1, 19
 - o Psalms: including chapters 12, 22, 44, 56, 86, 88, 102
 - o Lamentations: including chapters 1, 3
 - o Jeremiah: including chapters 4, 12, 15:10–20
 - o Jonah: Jonah’s prayer in Jonah 2 and Jonah’s complaint in Jonah 4
 - o Jesus and the disciples mourning Jesus’ own death in the Garden of Gethsemane: Luke 22:39–46
 - o Mary, Martha, and Jesus mourning the death of Lazarus: John 11:17–43
 - o Grief after Jesus’ death: John 20, Luke 23

Recognizing grief in children

There is no form or pattern for grief, and this is particularly true among children. While adults are typically able to recognize and understand responses such as shock, denial, anxiety, anger, sadness, stress, or loss of sleep/appetite,¹ children often face difficulty in understanding loss and in understanding and communicating their

own responses to it. As published by the CDC, “Sometimes children appear sad and talk about missing the person or act out. Other times, they play, interact with friends, and do their usual activities.”¹

According to the CDC, some common signs that a child may benefit from support as they grieve include:

- Acting out *
- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Sleeping more or less than expected
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Depression
- Confusion

**The National Alliance for Grieving Children writes: “Often when a child misbehaves they are trying to communicate a need for help, or a strong feeling, and just lack the vocabulary and skills needed. Adults may see negative or ‘acting out’ behavior as intentional, but sometimes it is just a reflection of the child’s limitations and desire for support. While no loss experience should excuse antisocial or dangerous behavior, we must not miss the messages in our child’s actions.”*

Approaching children and grief

It is important to remember that grief itself is a process necessary for wellness and flourishing; it “is not a problem we are trying to fix for a child.”² That being said, it is important that we hold and support the children in our community as they grieve. The National Alliance for Grieving Children shares several critical insights on this matter:

- In the wake of a loss, **it is important to tell children the truth.** Though many caregivers might prefer to protect their children from difficult truths, honesty is critical in strengthening trust and communicating support. “Although it may be challenging to share the truth about how someone died, honest answers build trust, help provide understanding, and allow children to feel comfortable approaching us with questions because they know they can trust us to tell them the truth. Children know more than we think they do and by not telling the truth, we risk leaving children to process complicated information on their own, rather than with the loving adults in their lives.”² Further, seeing adults avoid the topic of the loss may cause children to believe that discussing or expressing grief is a bad thing, further isolating them in their experience.
- **There is no timeline for grief** – in fact, children often experience grief over a significant loss in different ways at different times throughout their life. “Many times, intense feelings of grief will last longer and come more often than we think they should. In time, as children have opportunities to express their grief, tell their stories, share their memories, and process what this death means to them, they might find the intense feelings come less often. But grief is a lifelong journey, and children often experience their grief on different levels and at different times throughout their lives. When a child gets their driver's license, scores a touchdown, goes to prom, or graduates from high school, they might revisit their grief in a very intense way. This extends into adulthood as well; grief may recur when they have children of their own or get married. Grief has no time limit. Allowing children to share openly about feelings can help to normalize this experience and help them find ways to deal with these powerful feelings that will come and go ... and come back again throughout their lives.”²
- Each child’s (and each individual’s) **grief is unique to them and their relationship with the lost.** Children may need to talk directly about the loss and their feelings; use other modes of expression such as art, music, or play; not speak about the loss or their feelings at all; or respond in some other way. “It is important not to assume what children might be feeling about a person's death. Reactions vary from sadness, anger, fear, guilt and even relief. It is important to listen to children, meet them on their terms and come to understand their unique grief reactions.”²

- More than any information that we can provide in supporting grieving children, **presence and understanding are critical**, whether by allowing the children in your community to connect with other children who have experienced loss or by fostering safe and reliable spaces. “It is ... important for children to have adults in their lives who provide a safe environment that is consistent, teaches resilience and encourages accountability, while allowing children the freedom to express their grief. Research has shown that one of the top indicators of how well children will do after the death of a significant person in their life is directly related to the type of relationship they have with the surviving adult(s) in their lives and how well these adults are able to cope with their own grief.”²

What you can do to Support the Grieving Children in your Community **

- **Listen.** Validate the feelings and experiences of grieving children.
- **Allow expression.** Grieving children may experience big emotions, and they frequently do not have the words to articulate them. Don’t minimize the child’s experience or try to change them: foster safe spaces where children can fully express themselves, whatever that looks like for each child.
- **Encourage coping skills.** As a community or family, you can teach coping skills, such as mindful breathing, yoga, setting boundaries, using artistic outlets, playing, etc. “Help your child identify the different activities that work well for them and develop a plan for them these feelings arise.”
- **Model self-care.** You can’t fully support the grieving children in your community if you yourself are suffering. Practice coping skills, reach out to pastors, congregants, or others in your community for support, and care for yourself, both so that you may begin healing and so that you may model healing to the children around you.
- **Remember that there is no timeline for grief.** As mentioned, it is important to understand that all children will have good and difficult days, months, and years. “Be open about it if you are having a difficult day and encourage [the children in your community] to do the same, as this can help prevent misunderstanding.”
- **Be patient.** Listen to the grieving children and answer their questions, even if repeating information. Spend time with children patiently.
- **Initiate or keep traditions.** As a family or community, it is important to foster predictable structures within which you can remember a loss. Continue familiar traditions, create new rituals in memory of the loss, or intentionally discuss and make changes to pre-existing traditions in honor of the lost. Share memories, mark anniversaries, create memorials, etc.
- **“Ask for help.”** Lean on your church or other communities. Remember that grief is not something to be overcome or completed: foster systems of support who will journey through life with you and who will support you in supporting the children in your community, not just in the days and months after a loss, but in the longer term.
- **“Make new memories.”** Even as it is important to communicate to children that sadness, grief, anger, guilt, and other negative emotions are okay, it’s also critical to communicate that it’s okay to be happy too. Initiate new traditions, play games, visit new places, have fun together.

**These nine steps are adapted from the National Alliance for Grieving Children Toolkit.³

For more resources on **signs of grief in adults, children, and adolescents**, see these links:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/stress-coping/grief-loss.html>
<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>
<https://childrengrieve.org/resources/about-childhood-grief>

For more resources on **talking with children about difficult things**, caring for children, fostering healthy memories, and seeking support, see these links:
<https://childrengrieve.org/resources>

<https://indd.adobe.com/view/5229bd5d-3bbe-460d-9558-e3fcdd327194>

[https://childrengrieve.org/images/website/Resources/Tip_Sheet- 10 Ways to Help a Grieving Child.pdf](https://childrengrieve.org/images/website/Resources/Tip_Sheet-10_Ways_to_Help_a_Grieving_Child.pdf)

<https://www.fredrogerscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/exceladocument.pdf>

Sources

- 1- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/stress-coping/grief-loss.html>
- 2- <https://childrengrieve.org/resources/about-childhood-grief>
- 3- <https://indd.adobe.com/view/5229bd5d-3bbe-460d-9558-e3fcdd327194>

Other Resources in this Series

For more resources, see [Supporting Grieving Children Resource Roadmap](#)

For activities that families and congregations can use to support grieving children, see [Supporting Children Amid Loss: Activities for Children](#)

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May 2021

