

A young child with short dark hair is sitting on a black and white soccer ball on concrete steps. The child is wearing a bright pink long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and brown leather sandals. They are looking down with their right hand resting against their face, appearing to be in a state of sadness or contemplation. The scene is lit by bright sunlight, casting shadows on the steps.

The Good Grief Program

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH GRIEF

CENTER
BOSTON
MEDICAL



When children experience the death of someone important, their coping skills can be challenged. After a death, children may feel many different emotions and will need adult support. Caring adults can make a big impact during these times.

The Good Grief Program believes that adults play a key role in helping children make sense of the death of someone important, commemorate this person, and continue to move forward as they grieve. Remember these helpful tips when talking with children who have experienced the death of someone important:

1. Share information about the death in a clear, direct, and honest way

- It can feel uncomfortable to talk to children about death, but it's important to tell the truth!
- Use concrete, simple language. For example, "When someone dies, their body totally stops working. They cannot breathe, eat, think or talk anymore."
- Speak in terms that a child will understand.
- Avoid vague or abstract terms like "passed on" or "in a better place."
- Remember that these conversations rarely happen in one sitting. Children need multiple opportunities to hear information. It is helpful to regularly check in to see how they're doing and monitor their understanding.

Note: Some children may not want to or be ready to have this discussion. Here, it is important to communicate that you will be available when they are ready.

2. Pay attention to your own feelings

- Pay attention to your own feelings about this loss. Avoiding your own feelings can make it harder to talk to children about the death.
- It's okay to let them know that it's hard for you to talk about what has happened.
- Remind your child that just because you are sad, does not mean they cannot talk to you about how they are feeling.

3. Think about the child's other losses

- When children have experienced other losses like moving, divorce, or other deaths, their grief may be amplified. Having multiple losses could make a child worry about their safety and the safety of their family.
- Reassure them that you are working hard to keep them safe.

4. Address children's worries, anxieties, or misconceptions

- After a loss, children may experience many different worries. For example, some children may believe that they said or did something that may have caused the death.
- Give accurate yet age-appropriate information about the death and its cause.
- Reassure them that you are a trusted person that can help them with their grief.
- Check in with your child often to explore how they're doing. Give them space to ask questions.
- If you notice worries, fears, or misconceptions, work to reassure them and correct misconceptions (e.g., "Just because you were mad at Mommy, that didn't make her die. Mommy died because her body stopped working.")
- If children's worries or fears don't go away or begin to interfere with your child's day-to-day life, seek out additional supports.

5. Support grieving children and their feelings

- Grieving children may feel angry, sad, confused, guilty, and embarrassed. ALL of these feelings are okay and normal!
- Remind children that it helps to talk about how they are feeling.
- If you notice changes in behavior, this may be the child's way of showing you that s/he needs extra attention or support.
- If you feel that your child is having significant behavioral changes, consult with their doctor or a mental health professional for further support.

6. Find ways to remember the important person

- Encourage children to share their favorite memories of their special person (e.g., write letters, draw pictures, make a commemorative space).
- Create a family ritual around remembering the person. This can bring a family together in supporting one another.

7. Maintain consistent and regular routines

- Keeping consistent, structured routines helps children feel that their world is still under control.
- Maintaining regular schedules can help them to adapt to the changes while still moving forward.

Remember, it's okay to not know all of the answers.

Sometimes adults avoid talking with children about death, because they worry that their child will have questions they cannot answer. It's okay to not have all the answers! By having these conversations, you are letting your child know that you can talk about anything together. If your child asks a question that you do not have an answer for, it's ok to say, "I don't know, but I can try to find that out" or "I am not sure – what do you think?" This lets children know that their questions are important! It also lets them know that nothing is too difficult to talk about.

Responding to Grieving Children

Adults play an essential role in supporting grieving children. After a death, it's common to feel at a loss for what to say. Other times, well-meaning adults can say things to children that are not helpful in supporting loss. The list below offers some phrases to avoid and suggestions for helpful alternatives.

Avoid		Alternative
<p>Don't be sad. It's painful for adults to see children sad, but these feelings are a normal part of the grieving process. Allowing children to have space for their own emotional expression is key.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>I heard the difficult news. How are you doing today? Through gentle inquiries like this, adults make the child the priority.</p>
<p>I know exactly how you feel. Grief is a unique experience. It's impossible to know exactly how another person is grieving. It's helpful to offer support that focuses on how the child is doing.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>What has this been like for you? Asking open-ended questions gives children the space to discuss their own grief experience.</p>
<p>At least he is in a better place. These statements tend to minimize the child's loss. Children may feel limited in how they can respond to statements like these.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>Are there questions or concerns that you have? Children may not have a space where they can voice their questions or concerns. Checking in with them can offer a powerful source of support.</p>
<p>You should remember all of the positives you have in your life. Adults often try to offer children an optimistic way to view their situation, but these well-intentioned statements may limit children from expressing how they are truly feeling.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>Would you like to tell me some of your favorite memories of ___? This can help the child feel connected to their deceased loved one.</p>
<p>You need to be strong. Statements that encourage strength and responsibility can undermine the child's emotional experience. This could cause them to think that they should not be impacted by the loss.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>How have things been going the last few days? Frequent check-ins with grieving children help them feel supported. This helps them understand that their grief experience can fluctuate from day-to-day and week-to-week.</p>
<p>My aunt died when I was a kid, so I know what this must be like for you. Avoid comparisons. This moves the focus away from the child's loss.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>I've had a family member die, too. I know how that felt for me, but I wonder what this feels like for you? This lets children know that they're not alone, while maintaining the focus on how the child is doing.</p>
<p>Heaven needed another angel. For many families, spirituality can play an important role in the grieving process. However, statements that indicate that the deceased was "needed" by God or that they're "in a better place," can be difficult to hear. Children may feel that they also "need" the deceased or may wonder why being together is not the "better place" for them.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>I am here to help you. I can give you a hug or take you for a walk when you need a break. Small coping strategies like these can make children's grief and related feelings more manageable.</p>
<p>You must feel ___. The grief experience is comprised of many different emotions. Instead of labeling emotions for the child, help them identify their own emotions.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>How are you feeling? This allows children to define their emotional experience.</p>
<p>Say nothing. When adults avoid a child's grief, it can send the message that it's too difficult to discuss. Children may feel like it's "off-limits" to talk about their grief if the adults around them avoid the topic.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>I want you to know how much I care about you. Children feel supported when adults evidence their care and concern through words and actions.</p>