



## **WHEN DEATH HAPPENS**

### **HOW TO PROVIDE POSITIVE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN**

Excerpt of When Death Happens Parent Guide by Boulden Publishing, Inc.

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1. **EXPLAIN THAT DEATH IS NOT LIKE SLEEP.**  
Children often worry that they will not wake up.
2. **EXPLAIN THAT PHYSICAL DEATH IS FINAL.**  
This may be difficult for your child to understand.
3. **EXPLAIN THAT DEATH IS NOT A PUNISHMENT.**  
Neither the child nor the deceased is being punished for anything they have done.
4. **PROVIDE SECURITY.**  
Children often worry that another special person will die.  
The child should know that there will always be someone to care for him or her.
5. **ASSURE THE CHILD THAT SHE OR HE IS NOT THE CAUSE.**  
The child may feel that he or she was the reason the person died.
6. **LISTEN CAREFULLY.**  
Let the child talk about what they want to talk about. You don't have to agree.
7. **ALLOW ALL FEELINGS.**  
There are no wrong feelings, but there is unacceptable behavior.  
Encourage talking, no acting out.
8. **RELATE TO THE CHILD ON HIS OR HER LEVEL.**  
Use words and concepts that are right for the age and development of the child.
9. **LET THE CHILD BE A PART OF THE FAMILY GRIEVING PROCESS.**  
Don't try to "protect" the child by hiding the fact of physical death.
10. **TALK HONESTLY.**  
Children are curious about death and want the truth.



IOWA CITY HOSPICE

# *My Grief Rights*

Someone you loved has died. You are probably having many hurtful and scary thoughts and feelings right now. Together those thoughts and feelings are called grief, which is a normal (through really difficult) thing everyone goes through after someone they love has died.

The following 10 rights will help you understand your grief and eventually feel better about life again. Use the ideas that make sense to you. Post this list on your refrigerator or on your bedroom door or wall. Re-reading it often will help you stay on track as you move toward healing from your loss. You might also ask the grown-ups in your life to read this list so they will remember to help you in the best way they can.

1. I have the right to have my own unique feelings about the death. I may feel mad, sad or lonely. I may feel scared or relieved. I may feel numb or sometimes not anything at all. No one will feel exactly like I do.
2. I have the right to talk about my grief whenever I feel like talking. When I need to talk, I will find someone who will listen to me and love me. When I don't want to talk, that's OK, too.
3. I have the right to show my feelings of grief in my own way. When they are hurting, some kids like to play so they'll feel better for awhile. I can play or laugh, too. I might also get mad and scream. This does not mean I am bad, it just means I have scary feelings that I need help with.
4. I have the right to need other people to help me with my grief, especially grown-ups who care about me. Mostly I need them to pay attention to what I am feeling and saying and to love me no matter what.
5. I have the right to get upset about normal, everyday problems. I might feel grumpy and have trouble getting along with others sometimes.
6. I have the right to have "griefbursts." Griefbursts are sudden, unexpected feelings of sadness that just hit me sometimes—even long after the death. These feelings can be very strong and even scary. When this happens, I might feel afraid to be alone.
7. I have the right to use my beliefs about my god to help me deal with my feelings of grief. Praying might make me feel better and somehow closer to the person who died.
8. I have the right to try to figure out why the person I loved died. But it's OK if I don't find an answer. "Why" questions about life

and death are the hardest questions in the world.

9. I have the right to think and talk about my memories of the person who died. Sometimes those memories will be happy and sometimes they might be sad. Either way, these memories help me keep alive my love for the person who died.
10. I have the right to move forward and feel my grief and, over time, to heal. I'll go on to live a happy life, but the life and death of the person who died will always be a part of me. I'll always miss them.



# IOWA CITY HOSPICE

## Children and Grief

### Ages Two through Adolescence

#### **Children and Grief: Ages 2-5**

##### Understanding of Death

- Extremely egocentric and concrete; see death as a loss of love and protection, as abandonment.
- See death as a temporary departure or a separation; find it difficult to understand the concept of finality.
- May forget the person has died.
- Connect death with the event(s) that precede it, in a cause-and-effect way.
- See some distinction between life and death; associate life with movement and death with lack of movement; may confuse death with sleep.

##### Common Reactions

- Feeling abandoned, overwhelmed, and lonely.
- Denial, repression of facts.
- Regression in behaviors.
- Confusion about the circumstances of the death and a need to review it frequently.

##### What helps

- Consistent repetition of the facts.
- Simple explanations about whatever happens (e.g. funeral, rituals, burial, the death).
- Someone to support them and answer questions at high-stress times (e.g. following the death, funeral, visits to cemetery).
- Accurate, honest information at their level of understanding.
- Discussing what the person who dies can no longer do (e.g. move, breathe, eat).
- Physical contact, calm/soothing tones, quiet times.
- Continued reassurances (e.g. about their future, about events prior to the death).
- Consistent maintenance of usual routines and discipline.

#### **Children and Grief: Ages 6-8**

##### Understanding of Death

- Conflicting beliefs about death.
- Confusion and misunderstanding.
- Both concrete and magical thinking.
  - \*Language is used and understood literally.
  - \*Engage in wishful thinking ("if only").
  - \*Think of life as being linear, with a beginning and an end.
  - \*See death as external and therefore avoidable (won't happen to them or their loved ones).
  - \*May see death as a punishment (for the dead person or themselves)
  - \*May see death as a result of old age.
  - \*Personify death as monsters or boogeyman.
  - \*The concept of "life after death" is a contradiction of terms because death is seen as the end of life functions.

##### Common Reactions

- Ask a lot of questions, do research into the disease and death, focus on gory details.
- Have fears of being abandoned, of changes in their world, of more family deaths.
- Feel responsible for the death, for the family future, for making family members happy.
- Experience nightmares, restlessness, and diarrhea.
- Show regression in behaviors and emotions (e.g. bedwetting, thumb sucking, fears).

##### What helps

- Information and explanations should be accurate and literal.
- Explain death in terms of body functions (e.g. breathing, heart, brain).
- Grant permission to decide their own level of involvement in rituals, funerals and gatherings.
- Provide information and reassurances about their grief reactions and feelings, their responsibility for the death, and their future.
- Encourage child to engage in concrete survival activities (e.g. chores, play, and exercise).
- Provide opportunities to share their experiences with other grieving children.

## **Children and Grief: Ages 9-12**

### **Understanding of Death**

- Become less egocentric and develop social concerns.
- Make transition from concrete to more abstract thinking.
- Understand the universality and inevitability of death; see death as removed in time from themselves.
- Can generalize about death and understand its magnitude.
- Begin to believe that it can happen to anyone and struggle with this.
- See death clinically; fear it may be painful and scary.
- See death as part of life—natural, universal, and permanent.
- Express interest in what happens to a person's body and spirit after death; fear nonexistence and separation.

### **Common Reactions**

- Anxiety and general fearfulness.
- Covering up emotions and trying to appear normal.
- Concern about other survivors.

### **What helps**

- Honest and accurate information about the death
- Opportunities to ask their own questions.
- Reassurance about their future (e.g. if the other parent died, who would care for them and how).
- Adults to model appropriate grieving.
- Respect for the privacy of their thoughts, feelings, and writings.
- Inclusion, as wished, in adult activities associated with the death (rituals, funeral discussions, plans).

## **Children and Grief: Ages 13-17**

### **Understanding of Death**

- Intellectually able to understand implications of death as an adult would.
- Feel shocked that it could happen to their family and confused about how to react.
- Feel overwhelmed by intensity of emotions.
- Feel a sense of isolation and loneliness even among friends and family; feel different.
- Vacillate between acting like an adult and a child.

### **Common Reactions**

- Withdrawal; difficulty in finding a balance.
- Guilt about things said or not said, done or not done.
- Fear or disgust of the body.
- Tendency to remember only good things about the person.
- Tendency to blame others for the death and how it affects their life.
- Difficulty with eating or sleeping.

### **What helps**

- Honest and accurate information about the death and its circumstances.
- Support from friends and teachers, as well as family.
- Inclusion in discussions and decision making, as wished.
- Opportunities to spend more time alone.
- Balance between having time to be a child and time to take on some adult responsibilities.
- Keeping a journal or diary.

\*Source: Medical Care of the Dying 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Victoria Hospice Society, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada (1993).



# IOWA CITY HOSPICE

## **Printed Resources for Bereaved Children**

(Books marked with an \* are available to borrow from the Iowa City Hospice Lending Library.)

*\*Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope, Donna O'Toole*

Read-aloud story of pain of loss and hope of recovery. 6 years to adult.

*And Peter Said Goodbye, Liz Farrington*

Magical paints take Peter on a journey to say goodbye to his grandfather. Ages 5-9.

*Annie and the Old One, Miska Miles*

Grandmother teaches her granddaughter about life and death as she prepares to die. 6 to 12 years.

*Badger's Parting Gifts, Susan Varley*

Story of the death of old Badger, remembered by his animal friends. 5 to 9 years.

*Beat the Turtle Drum, Constance Greene*

Hopeful story of death of 11-year-old girl and its effects on her sister and parents. 10 years to adult.

*Blackberries in the Dark, Mavis Jukes*

Austin and his grandmother learn how to keep their memories of Grandpa alive on the farm. Ages 4-8.

*Blow Me a Kiss, Miss Lilly, Nancy Carlstrom*

Sara learns that memory lives on when her best friend, an old lady named Miss Lilly, dies. 4 to 8 years.

*Bridge to Terabithia, Katherine Paterson*

A story of a friendship between a boy and girl, a tragedy and the resurrection of hope. Newberry Award winner. 8 to 12 years.

*Charlotte's Web, E. B. White*

Classic story of the loving barn spider who explains death to Wilbur, the piglet, as she prepares to die. 5 years to adult.

*\*The Class in Room 44, Lynn Blackburn*

A story to help children label and deal with their feelings following the death of a classmate. Ages not listed.

*Dad! Why'd You Leave Me? Dorothy Frost*

10-year-old Ronnie feels anger, sorrow and confusion over the sudden death of his father.

*\*The Dead Bird, Margaret Wise Brown*

Some young children find a dead bird, then have a funeral and burial. 4 to 8 years.

*Emma Says Goodbye, Carolyn Nystrom*

Emma grows close to her Aunt Sue, who has come to live with the family during her terminal illness. 8 to 14 years.

*Everett Anderson's Goodbye, Clifton and Grifalconi*

Boy struggles with the death of his father. 5 to 12 years.

*Fall of Freddie the Leaf, Leo Buscaglia*

Story of life and death and the changing of the seasons. All ages.

*Geranium Morning, Sandy Powell*

After Timothy's father is killed in an accident, he meets Franny, whose mother is dying. Their sharing helps them both. Ages 4-8.

***God is Always with Me***, Helen Caswell

Picture book that responds to a child's questions about why things change. Ages 2-6.

***Goodbye, Mitch***, Ruth Wallace-Brodeur

Tender story of what a child experiences when the cat he loves grows ill and dies. Ages 4-8.

***\*Goodbye Rune***, Kaldhol and Oyen

Story of the death of a young girl's best friend by drowning, and how her parents help. 5 to 12 years.

***Grandad Bill's Song***, Jane Yolen

Poetic book about how different members of a family respond to a death. Ages 4-8.

***Gran-Gran's Best Trick***, Dwight Holden

Sensitive story of a child whose grandparent develops cancer and dies. Ages 9-12.

***Grandpa Loved***, Josephine Nobisso

Story of how a child worries, grieves and heals as his beloved pet dies, all the while influenced by his loving grandparent. Ages 9-12.

***\*How It Feels When a Parent Dies***, Jill Krementz

Collection of photo-essays with thoughts and feelings of 18 children, aged 7 to 16.

***I Had a Friend Named Peter***, J. Cohn

Betsy's best friend dies suddenly and her parents and teacher help her learn that, though people may die, memories live forever. 5 to 10 years.

***I Know I Made It Happen***, Lynn Blackburn

Validating book to help children with the fear and guilt that they caused a death or illness. Ages 4-8.

***I'll Always Love you***, Hans Wilhelm

A boy tells of his dog, Elfie, who ages and dies, offering the importance of telling loved ones how you feel while you still can. 3 to 7 years.

***It Must Hurt a Lot***, Doris Sanford

A boy learns to express his feelings after his dog is killed. 4 to 10 years.

***Learning to Say Goodbye***, Eda LeShan

Classic book written for children about the problems they face when a parent has died. 8 to 12 years.

***Lifetimes***, Mellonie and Ingpen

Describes the cycles of life in plants, animals and people. 3 to 10 years.

***\*Losing Uncle Tim***, MaryKate Jordan

When his Uncle Tim dies of AIDS, Daniel first struggles, then finds understanding and hope. 7 to 12 years.

***Love, Mark***, Mark Scrivani

Hand-printed, illustrated letters to children to answer their questions about death and grief. Ages 7-12.

***Mustard***, Charlotte Graeber

8-year-old boy deals with the death of the family cat, by denial, anger and sadness. 6 to 9 years.

***My Grandson Lew***, William duBois

Tender book illustrating how grief reaches across the years. 4 to 8 years.

***Nadia the Willful***, Sue Alexander

Inspiring story of the angry feelings of a girl after the death of her brother and the role of remembrance in healing. Ages 7-12.

**\*Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs, Tomie dePaola**

Charming picture book that recognizes that even after a family member dies the love connections continue. Ages 3-7.

**No New Baby, Marilyn Gryte**

Story for children whose mother miscarries. 3 to 7 years.

**Pablo Remembers, George Ancona**

Colorful story of the Mexican fiesta of the Day of the Dead and how Pablo commemorates those he loves. Ages 9-12.

**A Quilt for Elizabeth, Benette Tiffault**

Elizabeth and her grandmother make a quilt and share their stories and tears following the death of Elizabeth's father. Ages 4-8.

**Saying Goodbye, Jim Boulden**

Award-winning booklet with color-in cartoons, drawings and activities to help children understand the finality of death. Ages 4-12.

**Saying Goodbye to Daddy, Judith Vigna**

Clare's mother and grandfather help her cope with the sudden death of her daddy in a car accident. 5 to 8 years.

**\*The Snowman, Robin Helene Vogel**

Two brothers build a snowman in honor of their deceased father. 8 to 12 years.

**So Much to Think about, Fred Rogers**

Activity book for children dealing with the death of a loved one, right out of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

**\*Something to Remember Me By, Susan V. Bosak**

Story of the relationship of a grandmother and granddaughter over the years. Age 10 and up.

**Tell Me Papa, Joy and Mary Johnson**

A grandfather explains what happens when someone dies and the meaning of the funeral. 4 to 8 years.

**\*The Tenth Good Thing about Barney, Judith Viorst**

Provocative book about the death and burial of a cat, about grief, and about what happens after death. Ages 4-8.

**The Velveteen Rabbit, Margery Williams**

Classic story of love and death, written from the point of view of a toy rabbit. Ages 4-adult.

**When I Die, Will I Get Better?, J. and P. Breebaart**

Story written by a 5-year-old boy, assisted by his father, about healing after the death of his young brother. Ages 5-adult.

**When Grandpa Came to Stay, Judith Caseley**

A child and grandparent learn that joy and sorrow are worth sharing, through a trip to the cemetery. 3 to 7 years.

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The following is an adapted version of a bibliography courtesy of James E. Miller, founder and owner of Willowgreen Consulting, Productions and Publishing, P.O. Box 25180, Ft. Wayne, IN 46825

**\*A Taste of Blackberries, Doris Buchanan Smith**

A boy's friend dies after a bee sting. 10 to 13 years.

**\*The Education of Little Tree, Forrest Carter**

A boy loses both of his parents and goes to live with his Cherokee grandparents in the 1930s. Ages 12 to adult.

**\*The Empty Place, Roberta Termes**

A third-grade boy's big sister dies. He goes through lots of feelings and questions and gets help from his babysitter, who lost her own brother. 8 to 12 years.

**\*Hey, What's Wrong With This One? Maia Wojciechowska**

Three brothers grieve, each in their own way, for their mother. 10 to 13 years.

***\*I Heard Your Mommy Died***, Mark Scrivani

Read-aloud book about life after a mother's death. 2 to 6 years.

***\*Jungle Journey***, Barbara McIntyre

Animals take a journey through the jungle after the death of their beloved Eleanor the Elephant. Ages not listed.

***\*Just a Heartbeat Away***, Gabriel Constans

A mother dies of AIDS and her child is left behind. Ages not listed.

***\*Loss and How to Cope With It***, Joanne E. Bernstein

Talks about all kinds of losses. 12 to 16 years.

***\*Since My Brother Died***, Marisol Munoz-Kiehne

A young boy tells about his feelings, thoughts and experiences after his brother died. In both English and Spanish. Ages 4-8.

***\*To Hell with Dying***, Alice Walker and Catherine Dieter

Story of a child's experience of death through the family's friend Mr. Sweet. Ages 8-12.

***\*Where is Grandpa?*** T. A. Barron

A young boy and his family remember his grandfather together. Ages 4-8.

***\*Where's Jess?*** Joy and Marv Johnson

A young girl responds to her baby brother's death. 3 to 7 years.