

THE GRIEF SCHOOL

How to Support a Grieving Child



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Welcome Message

I am sorry you are here.
I know you did not ask to be part of this.
And yet, here you are.
That matters.
I want to be clear about what this is.
And what it is not.
This will not take your pain away.
One page cannot do that.
One PDF cannot do that.
If it could, I would have done it already.
What this can do is help you understand what is happening.
It can help explain why this hurts the way it does.
It can help you feel a little less confused.
This is an introduction.
From me to you.
I cannot fix this for you.
I will not pretend that I can.
What I can do is listen.
I can witness your grief.
I can help you make sense of it.
I can help you move it, when you are ready.
Nothing is required of you here.
You do not need to feel hopeful.
You do not need to feel strong.
You do not need to feel anything different than what you feel right now.
You are not broken.
Your grief is not wrong.
Your pain makes sense.
Take what helps.
Leave the rest.
I am here.
With care,
Sharon

How to Support a Grieving Child

Helping Your Child Grieve

Children feel grief just as deeply as adults do. They simply don't have the words for it yet.

Your job isn't to protect them from pain. It's to walk beside them through it. Children learn how to grieve by watching the adults they trust. When you tell the truth, name emotions, and show them what sadness looks like, you give them permission to be real. Grief in kids shows up in bursts. Tears one minute, play the next. That's normal. They move in and out of pain faster than adults because their hearts can't hold big feelings for long. Don't mistake that for "getting over it." They will circle back again and again, each time understanding the loss a little more deeply.

And when you talk to them, use real words. Say dead and died. Don't hide behind "passed away," "lost," or "gone to sleep." Those phrases only confuse children and make death sound mysterious or reversible. You're not protecting them by softening the truth. You're leaving them in the dark.

Telling the truth doesn't make grief worse. It makes it safe. When a child hears the truth from you, they learn that grief isn't something to fear or avoid. Remember, you're not just helping them survive this loss. You're teaching them how to grieve.

This guide offers what to always do and what to never do when helping a child face loss. Use it as a reminder that the truth heals, silence harms, and love, real and honest love, is the safest place a grieving child can land.

Grieving while parenting.

Telling your truth about your own grief will help to reassure your child that he or she is not alone and that it is acceptable to feel all types of emotions in response to loss.

- *Be willing to let them see you sad*
- *Be willing to talk about the loss*
- *Be open to discussing the hard parts, honestly*
- *Be willing to maintain a genuine, warm, and supportive conversation*
- *Be willing to discuss grief as it changes and shifts in the days, weeks and years to come*

Hiding your own grief and not allowing the expression of emotions like sadness and anger will do more harm than good. Denying your child, the ability to express themselves freely can lead to:

- *Your Child Feeling Isolated- imagine how confusing it would be to think he or she is the only one expressing such pain and how isolating it would be to think the emotions they feel so strongly are unacceptable.*
- *It is beneficial for children to learn how to tolerate and cope with their emotions, as opposed to learning how to avoid them. Avoiding not only prohibits a person from fully engaging with the world, but it can contribute to psychological disorders like anxiety, depression and PTSD.*
- *Your child learning that emotions and memories should be feared. When a child feels that certain emotions and emotional expressions are unacceptable or should be avoided, the message they receive is that these emotions are bad.*

ALWAYS**Always go first.**

Children follow your emotional lead. If you talk about your feelings, they learn it's safe to talk about theirs. You don't need the perfect words, just honesty and heart.

Always tell the truth.

Children deserve real words. Say death and died. Avoid phrases like "gone to sleep" or "passed away." Those soften your discomfort, not their pain. Clarity builds safety. When you tell the truth, you show them grief isn't something to hide.

Always talk about the person who died.

Say their name. Share stories. Bring them into conversations naturally. "Your dad loved this song," or "Grandma always made pancakes like this." Kids don't always talk back, but they are listening. You are teaching them that love doesn't disappear just because a person's body did.

Always recognize that grief is emotional, not logical.

Children's feelings will swing wildly. That's normal. Don't correct emotion, hold it. Let them cry, rage, or be silent.

Always listen with your heart.

Let every emotion exist without judgment. When a child says, "I miss him," your best response is, "I miss him too." Simple truth comforts more than explanations ever could.

Always remember each child is unique.

Every relationship to the loss is different. Some children talk a lot. Some withdraw. Don't push or label. Just keep showing up.

Always be patient.

Grief takes time, and more time after that. Children repeat questions because they're trying to make sense of something their minds can't yet hold. Each answer you give builds understanding.

Always model healthy grief.

If they see you cry, they learn crying is okay. If they see you take a walk or talk to someone, they learn what care looks like. You're teaching by example, whether you realize it or not.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

What messages about grief did you learn as a child?

How could you model something healthier for your children now?

How can you keep the memory of your person alive in everyday conversation?

NEVER**Never say, "Don't feel scared."**

Fear is natural. Say, "It's okay to feel scared. I'm right here with you."

Never say, "Don't feel sad."

Sadness is love missing its person. When you shut it down, you teach kids to hide their hearts.

Never avoid the words death and died.

When you say, "We lost Grandma," kids go looking for her. When you say, "She went to sleep," bedtime becomes terrifying. Clear words heal confusion.

Never ask, "How are you feeling?"

Most kids will say "fine." Instead, notice and name. "You look quiet today. Are you thinking about Mom?" That's how you open the door.

Never act strong just to protect them.

If they never see you cry, they'll think emotions are dangerous.
Strength isn't silence. Strength is honesty.

Never compare their pain.

Telling them someone else has it worse minimizes their experience.
Comparison closes hearts.

Never make promises you can't keep.

Don't say, "Everything will be okay." Instead say, "We'll get through this together."

Never forget that children are smart.

They sense more than they understand. Speak with respect. Tell the truth in language they can hold, not stories meant to protect you.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

Which "never" have you caught yourself doing out of fear or habit?
What would it look like to start saying your person's name out loud again?

How might your home change if sadness had space to breathe?

The Five C's**What Children Are Actually Worried About**

When someone dies, children are not thinking like adults. They are not wondering about meaning or timelines or acceptance. They are asking survival questions.

Kids usually worry about five things.

Did I cause this?

Can I catch this?

Why couldn't I control it?

Why couldn't it be cured?

Who is going to take care of me now?

These questions are not dramatic. They are protective. A child's brain is trying to figure out if the world is still safe and if they are still safe in it.

Children need time and attention to say these worries out loud. Not once. Not perfectly. Over and over again. They need adults who will answer honestly instead of brushing it off or trying to make it better too fast.

When these Five C's are not addressed, kids make up their own answers. And those answers usually involve blame, fear, and silence.

When we speak directly to these worries, we help a child's nervous system calm down. That is what allows grief to move through instead of getting stuck inside their body.

This is not about protecting children from pain.
This is about protecting them from carrying fear they were never meant to hold.

How to Bring It Up When They Never Ask

One worry at a time

You do not schedule this. You weave it in. You drop truth gently and then you stop.

Did I cause this?

You say this on a normal day, out of nowhere, while doing something ordinary:

"I want to tell you something important. This didn't happen because of anything you did or thought. Kids don't cause people to die."
Then you shut up. Let it land.

Can I catch this?

This one comes up around illness, a doctor visit, or when they ask about bodies:

“You don’t have to worry about your body. You can’t catch this. You’re safe.”

That’s it. No lecture.

Why couldn’t I control it?

This shows up when they’re angry or trying to make sense of it:

“I wish there had been something someone could’ve done to stop this. There wasn’t. This wasn’t in anyone’s control.”

Say it once. Say it again later if needed.

Why couldn’t it be cured?

This one comes when they talk about doctors, hospitals, or medicine:

“The doctors tried to help. Sometimes bodies can’t be fixed, even when people try really hard.”

Stop there.

Who is going to take care of me now?

This one matters the most. You say it early. You say it often.

“I’m here. You’re taken care of. That part is not changing.”

Repeat it. Even if they roll their eyes.

The Rule Parents Miss

You are not trying to finish the conversation.

You are trying to **keep the door open**.

You drop truth.

You pause.

You let their body absorb safety.

This is not about answering every question.

It's about making sure fear does not get to be the narrator.

That's how you do this without sounding weird, clinical, or forced.

And yes. You were right to call that out.

Make your love one a part of everyday family life.

Your loved one has died, but that doesn't mean that they aren't still an important part of you and your family. Continue to find ways to talk about your loved one and to make them a part of your life.

When Austin died, it was very important to Erica that we keep his memory alive for three-year-old Jordan. She encouraged everyone to tell stories about him regularly and she made it a tradition to continue to celebrate his birthday every year. They still do this to this day.

Remember that special days, hard days, milestones, and holidays may be especially difficult for your child, so it's important to have a plan for those days. Involve your children with developing the plan so that it will be meaningful for them as well.

Take space when you need it.

Trust your gut when considering how much emotion is too much for your child to witness from you. Although we encourage you to grieve openly, we do recognize that there is a point when this can lead to the child feeling responsible for the emotional well-being of the parent.

Important:

Parenting while grieving follows the same guidelines as applying an oxygen mask when on an airplane. You have to put the mask on yourself first, before you put the mask on your child. In order to

encourage your child to heal you must go after what is broken in your heart as well.

Your child will learn how to handle their grief by watching you.

This type of learning can happen at any time in a person's life, but it is most common in childhood as kids learn to navigate the world by paying attention to the behavior of their peers and trusted adults

You may instinctively feel as though you should protect your child from negative emotions by masking your grief or by minimizing reminders of loved ones no longer here. However, this benefits no one. Think about it. After a child has experienced the death

of someone they love, or even a beloved pet it is impossible to protect them from difficult emotions. Instead, it's important that parents show their children that while the emotions of grief can be extremely painful, they are acceptable, normal, and not to be feared.

A REMINDER

*Talking about death doesn't damage children. **Silence does.***

When you use real words, name real feelings, and speak your person's name, you show your child that grief is not something to hide. You are not just comforting them. You are teaching them how to live with love and loss.

Most of us will not know how to do this grieving thing on our own. We will need help, and that's okay. Grief was never meant to be a solo act. It takes community, honesty, and practice.

Every conversation, every truth, every story you share is a lesson. You are teaching your child how to grieve. And someday, that gift will save them.

The Grief School | Where Healing Begins

Learn more about guiding your family through grief at **clickhereforhope.com**