



HOSPICE
RED RIVER VALLEY

How to Help Grieving Children

- Use natural circumstances to teach children about loss and death before it occurs in the family (e.g., death of a pet, seasonal changes, etc.).
- Reassure children that they will be cared for, loved and cherished as before. The greatest fear of bereaved children is that of being left out or deserted.
- Provide simple, direct, honest and calm explanations following a loss or death. Deception or hiding the facts will cause children to feel betrayed and erode the trust they have in you. If a child has questions, keep your answers short, allowing the child to respond. If you don't have an answer, say so.
- When speaking about death, use appropriate words of finality: "death" or "died," not "going to sleep," "passing on," or "becoming an angel."
- Touch, hug and hold your children. Non-verbal communication is the most powerful and direct way of telling children you care.
- Encourage children to ask questions. Do this repeatedly. Listen as children tell you about their own unique grief experiences.
- Explain that the loss is not the children's fault. Discourage children's "magical thinking." However, accept each child's expressions of guilt or regret and offer reassurance.
- Don't give up on discipline. Maintain usual routines, limits and agendas. Consistency is crucial as children adapt to changes the loss brings.
- Allow children to participate in any and all rituals around the loss, such as the funeral, but don't force them to do so. Children should be made to feel they are an important part of the family. Describe the proceedings in detail beforehand. Consider providing a private time for children with the deceased before the viewing or funeral, and allow them to say goodbye in whatever manner they wish. Alternative types of personal memorials between children and the deceased may be more appropriate or meaningful, such as planting a tree, painting a picture or making a memory book.
- Allow children to observe others mourning. Explain the feelings behind the behaviors, and don't attach any shame to these feelings. By modeling appropriate grieving behavior, you give children permission to grieve, too. Don't insist that a child be a "brave little man" when he is a scared little boy.
- Allow children to be angry, but not destructive or violent. Help your children to talk it out by listening without judgement.
- Provide information to other significant adults in your children's lives (e.g., teachers, day care providers) about the loss the children are experiencing. Enlist their help in supporting your children and helping them handle the topic with peers.
- Be tolerant. It is normal for children confronted with a loss to regress to levels below their present levels of maturity.
- Allow children opportunities to be children. Children do not sustain their grief as adults do, and often vent their emotions through play.
- Allow for forms of remembrance, such as talking about the loved one who has died. This assures children that "dead" does not mean "forgotten." Be natural about this, and children will feel free to do the same.
- Don't try to rush the grieving process. Healing from grief is a process, not an event. Every adult and child goes through the process at his or her own pace.
- Remember that you cannot help facilitate your children's grief unless you are attending to your own grief. Allow yourself time, space and memories, and find sustainable sources of support for yourself.