

Grief Notes

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The Vital Importance of Grief Support for Children and Teens

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What should we do when a child in our life is grieving? For many adults, this question feels overwhelming—especially when they are grieving too. Children often express grief differently from adults, which can make it difficult to understand what they are experiencing. A grieving child may suddenly return to normal, everyday behaviors, showing few outward signs of distress and asking no questions about the loss. While this can be a relief to adults, it can also create uncertainty. Many worry that asking questions or offering explanations might introduce new pain, making the child's grief worse rather than better.

Because of these concerns, adults may feel tempted to say or do nothing. Sadly, this is the least helpful response. Children experience the same emotions as adults, but they often lack the vocabulary to describe their feelings or even to form questions about them. With limited life experience, death can be difficult to understand—and for younger children, nearly impossible. Children rely on the adults in their lives to guide them through confusing and painful experiences, and no matter how calm or “normal” they may appear, they always need support when someone dies.

Research shows that when adults respond in ways that help children face their loss and work through their grief, there are often few—or even no—lasting emotional scars. In contrast, when adults try to shield children from the reality of death, children are left to make sense of it on their own. Using imagination and “magical thinking,” some children may assume they are responsible for the death. Many are too frightened to share these thoughts, fearing blame or punishment. Adults are often shocked to learn what children have quietly carried inside. When grief is left unaddressed, its effects can persist for the rest of a child's life. No child should have to carry the burden of grief alone.

Children's grief is a complex and expansive topic, made even more so by the fact that children's needs—and the types of support that help them most—vary by developmental stage. This article cannot address every aspect of how children grieve. Instead, its purpose is to emphasize one essential point: regardless of a child's age or outward behavior, support matters. Consider seeking out a children's grief center in your area, contacting the child's school guidance office, or visiting your local public library for resources. You can also reach out to your Northern Light bereavement coordinator for additional guidance and support.



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