



UNDERSTANDING HOW CHILDREN GRIEVE

*Recognizing the Ways Children Experience and
Express Loss*

Children grieve, but their grief often looks different from an adult's. A child may cry one moment and return to play the next, ask the same question repeatedly, seem unaffected, become clingy, or show changes in behavior rather than talk about sadness. These responses can be part of the child's way of taking in a reality that is too large to understand all at once.

CHILDREN GRIEVE IN DOSES

Children often move in and out of grief. Play, school, friends, and ordinary activities can give them natural breaks from intense feelings. A child who laughs or plays soon after a death is not necessarily avoiding the loss. They may be processing grief in smaller amounts that feel manageable.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Repeated questions about what happened or where the person is.
- Changes in sleep, concentration, appetite, play, schoolwork, or behavior.
- Periods of sadness, anger, fear, clinginess, withdrawal, or seemingly ordinary activity.

GENTLE REMINDER

A child can be grieving even while playing, laughing, learning, and participating in ordinary life. Grief and childhood can exist side by side.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Use simple, truthful language and answer the question the child is actually asking. Maintain familiar routines when possible and let the child know who will care for them. Invite feelings and questions without forcing conversation. Children often need the same information repeated as they gradually understand what death means.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Simple statements such as, "I am here with you," "You can ask me anything," and "It is okay to have many different feelings" can create safety. When explaining death, concrete words such as "died" and "the body stopped working" are generally clearer for children than phrases such as "went to sleep" or "went away."

A DEEPER LOOK

A child's understanding of death changes with development. Younger children may not fully understand that death is permanent, while older children may understand permanence but struggle with fairness, identity, or fears about other people dying. The same child may revisit the loss years later with entirely new questions.

GRIEF MAY SHOW UP THROUGH BEHAVIOR

Children do not always have words for grief. Feelings may appear through play, drawings, physical complaints, irritability, difficulty separating from caregivers, changes at school, or renewed behaviors they had previously





outgrown. Behavior is communication, and curiosity about what may be underneath it is often more helpful than immediate correction.

Adults can provide calm limits while also acknowledging the feeling: “I can see that today is hard. It is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hurt someone.”

- A child does not need to grieve in the same way as an adult to be grieving deeply.
- A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION
- WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Children do not need adults to have every answer. They need truthful information, dependable care, and permission to return with questions as they grow.

If changes are persistent, worsening, significantly interfering with daily life, or raising concerns about the child's safety, consider additional support from a qualified pediatric or mental-health professional experienced with children and bereavement.

REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

As children grow, they may return to the same loss with new questions and emotions. A death understood at age six can have new meaning at twelve or sixteen. This revisiting is part of development, not evidence that the child is grieving incorrectly.

SUPPORTING THE CHILD IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Keep routines as predictable as reasonably possible, let teachers or caregivers know about the loss, and make room for ordinary childhood experiences. A child benefits from knowing that grief does not remove permission to play, learn, laugh, rest, and enjoy other people.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What is this child showing you through words, play, questions, or behavior? What might help them feel safer and more understood today?

A GENTLE CLOSING

Presence matters more than perfect words. By staying available, answering honestly, noticing changes, and allowing grief to unfold in the child's own way, adults can provide a steady place of support.

With heartfelt compassion,
Linda Findlay
Founder, Mourning Discoveries

