



WHAT GRIEF MAY LOOK LIKE IN A CHILD

*Recognizing Emotional, Behavioral, Physical, and
Everyday Responses to Loss*

Children do not always say, “I am grieving.” Their grief may appear in feelings, behavior, play, school performance, sleep, physical complaints, or changes in how closely they want to stay near trusted adults. Some reactions are obvious; others can be easy to miss or mistaken for misbehavior.

GRIEF CAN LOOK DIFFERENT FROM DAY TO DAY

A child may be tearful in the morning and happily playing later the same day. Another child may rarely cry but become irritable, quiet, distracted, or unusually worried. There is no single outward appearance of grief, and children within the same family may respond very differently.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Sadness, anger, fear, guilt, confusion, numbness, or repeated questions.
- Clinginess, separation worries, withdrawal, acting out, regression, or changes in play.
- Changes in sleep, appetite, concentration, school performance, energy, or physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches.

GENTLE REMINDER

Behavior can be communication. A grieving child may be showing feelings they do not yet know how to explain.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Look beneath the behavior before deciding what it means. Maintain reasonable limits and routines while offering additional patience and connection. Name what you observe without telling the child what they must feel: “You seem quieter today. I am here if you want to talk or sit together.”

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: “There are lots of ways people feel after someone dies.” “You can feel sad and still have fun.” “You won’t get in trouble for asking about them.” “If you don’t want to talk now, you can come back later.” These messages reduce pressure while keeping communication open.

A DEEPER LOOK

Grief reactions can overlap with ordinary developmental behavior, stress, family disruption, and other challenges. One difficult day or isolated behavior rarely tells the whole story. Patterns, intensity, duration, and the degree to which changes interfere with everyday functioning are more useful to notice.

PLAY CAN BE A LANGUAGE OF GRIEF

Children may repeat themes of illness, death, rescue, separation, funerals, or reunion in play. Drawing, building, movement, music, and imaginative play can provide ways to explore feelings that are difficult to put into words.





Adults do not need to interpret every drawing or game. Often the most helpful response is to be present, notice gently, and let the child lead.

- Grief may become more visible around reminders, changes in routine, family stress, anniversaries, or developmental milestones.
- A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION
- WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Instead of asking only, “What is wrong with this behavior?” it can help to also ask, “What might this child be trying to tell me?”

Consider professional support when concerning changes persist or worsen, significantly disrupt school, relationships, sleep, eating, or daily functioning, or when a child talks about wanting to die, self-harm, or being unsafe.

LOOK FOR PATTERNS, NOT PERFECTION

Grief can create temporary changes without every change becoming a problem. Notice what is different, how long it lasts, how intense it is, and whether the child can still participate in relationships, school, play, sleep, and daily routines.

SUPPORTING THE CHILD IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Offer choices for expression: talking, drawing, movement, memory activities, quiet time, or simply being together. Coordinate with school or childcare when helpful so adults can notice patterns across settings without making the child feel watched.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What changes have you noticed since the death? Which seem temporary and manageable, and which may be asking for more attention, reassurance, or support?

A GENTLE CLOSING

Children often communicate grief in pieces. Patient observation, predictable care, honest conversation, and room for both sadness and ordinary childhood can help adults respond to what the child needs.

With heartfelt compassion,
Linda Findlay
Founder, Mourning Discoveries

