



WHY CHILDREN MOVE IN AND OUT OF GRIEF

*Understanding the Natural Rhythm of Grief in
Childhood*

A grieving child may cry deeply and then ask to play. They may talk about the person who died and minutes later become absorbed in a game, television show, or conversation with friends. This quick movement between grief and ordinary childhood can surprise adults, but it is a common way children manage emotions that may otherwise feel too large.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT MAY BE HAPPENING

Children often experience grief in shorter periods than adults. Their attention, development, and natural need for play can give them breaks from intense feelings. These pauses do not mean the child has forgotten the person or is unaffected by the death.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Strong emotion may appear suddenly and pass quickly.
- The child may return to play immediately after talking about the death.
- Grief may reappear around reminders, separations, school events, holidays, or developmental milestones.

GENTLE REMINDER

A child who laughs, plays, or becomes excited about something has not forgotten the person who died.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Allow the child to move between grief and ordinary activities without requiring them to stay sad. Follow their lead when they want to talk, and allow play when they are ready to play. Predictable routines and ordinary childhood experiences can provide important stability.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

You can say, “It is okay to miss her and still have fun.” “You can talk about him whenever you want.” “You do not have to feel sad all the time to love someone who died.” These messages reduce the pressure to perform grief in a particular way.

A DEEPER LOOK

Adults sometimes interpret a child's playfulness as denial or lack of understanding. In reality, play can provide emotional regulation and may also become a way of processing the loss. A child can hold grief and joy very close together.





GRIEF CAN RETURN WITHOUT WARNING

A smell, song, classroom assignment, family photograph, empty chair, or ordinary comment can suddenly bring the loss back into focus. The child may seem surprised by their own reaction. Adults can normalize the return of feelings without suggesting that the child is going backward.

PLAY IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF GRIEF

Play supports development, connection, imagination, and relief from stress. Protecting time for play after a death can be part of supporting a grieving child rather than distracting them from grief.

REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

As children mature, grief may return in new forms because they understand the loss differently. A child may revisit the death at each stage of development, especially during important milestones.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Children often take grief in small enough pieces to keep growing. Their return to play can be part of coping, not an absence of love.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Does this child seem to need permission to play, laugh, or enjoy something? How can the adults around them make room for both grief and ordinary childhood?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

If the child rarely seems able to return to ordinary activities, remains persistently distressed, or shows significant and ongoing changes in functioning, consider consulting a qualified professional.

A GENTLE CLOSING

Children do not have to remain inside grief every moment in order for their grief to be real. Moving in and out can be one way they carry loss while continuing the important work of being a child.

Where do you see this child naturally taking breaks from grief? How can you protect those moments without avoiding the loss?

PROTECTING ORDINARY CHILDHOOD

After a death, adults may become watchful of every laugh, game, or change in mood. Children benefit when the people around them continue to make room for school, friendships, sports, celebrations, imagination, and fun. Ordinary experiences can provide stability when much of life feels different.

Adults can also keep the person who died present in natural ways without making every activity about grief. A memory can be mentioned, a photograph enjoyed, or a name spoken while still allowing the child to return to whatever comes next.

