



## GROWING UP WITH GRIEF: HOW CHILDREN REVISIT LOSS AS THEY MATURE

*Understanding Why the Same Death Can Feel  
Different at Each Developmental Stage*

Children do not understand a death once and for all. As their thinking, relationships, identity, and life experiences develop, they may return to the same loss with new questions and new feelings. A death that occurred in early childhood can be experienced again in meaningful ways during adolescence and adulthood - not because the child has gone backward, but because they now understand more.

### GRIEF DEVELOPS AS THE CHILD DEVELOPS

A preschooler may understand that someone is absent but not fully grasp permanence. A school-age child may become more interested in causes and facts. An adolescent may understand the long-term meaning of the loss for identity, relationships, milestones, and the future.

### WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- New questions about the death months or years later.
- Renewed sadness or anger around developmental milestones and family transitions.
- Wanting different information, memories, photographs, or stories than they wanted when younger.

### GENTLE REMINDER

A child asking old questions again may not have forgotten the answers. They may be asking the question with a new level of understanding.

### EXPECT THE STORY TO NEED UPDATING

Information that was appropriate at age five may be incomplete at age twelve. Revisit the explanation using language that matches the child's current understanding. If adults withheld details for developmental reasons, consider when and how those details should be explained later.

### WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "You were younger when this happened, so you may understand it differently now." "You can ask me questions again, even if we talked about them before." "There may be things you want to know now that did not matter to you then."

### MILESTONES CAN REVEAL NEW PARTS OF THE LOSS

Graduations, learning to drive, first jobs, dating, marriage, becoming a parent, achievements, and family celebrations may highlight what the child expected the person to witness. These moments can contain pride and grief at the same time.





## MEMORIES MAY CHANGE TOO

Very young children may have few direct memories and depend on stories, photographs, recordings, and family traditions. As they mature, they may want a fuller picture of who the person was, including ordinary details and family history.

## DO NOT INTERPRET RENEWED GRIEF AS FAILURE

- A new wave of grief does not mean the child failed to cope earlier. Development creates new capacities to understand attachment, permanence, identity, and future loss. The child is meeting the loss from a new place.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- This principle is central to childhood bereavement: support should remain available beyond the immediate aftermath. The questions of a six-year-old, twelve-year-old, and eighteen-year-old may all concern the same death but require very different conversations.

### A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Children do not simply “finish” grieving and move on. They often return to the loss as they grow, discovering new meaning while continuing to build a life around it.

## A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

**What might this child understand now that they could not understand when the death occurred? What information, story, memory, or conversation may need to be revisited?**

## WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

**Renewed grief around development and milestones can be expected. Additional support may be useful when reactions become severe, persistent, unsafe, or significantly interfere with daily functioning.**

## A GENTLE CLOSING

**Children grow around their grief. The loss remains part of their story, but their understanding of it expands. Adults can help by remaining willing to revisit the past without assuming that an old loss should no longer matter.**

What might this child understand now that they could not understand when the death occurred?  
What information, story, memory, or conversation may need to be revisited?

