



WHEN A CHILD DOES NOT WANT TO TALK ABOUT THE DEATH

*Respecting Silence While Keeping the Door Open
for Grief*

Adults often worry when a grieving child does not want to talk. Silence does not necessarily mean the child is avoiding grief, does not understand, or is unaffected. Children process loss in many ways, including play, movement, art, routine, observation, private thought, and short conversations that appear when adults least expect them.

DO NOT EQUATE TALKING WITH HEALING

Conversation can be helpful, but it is not the only healthy way to grieve. Repeatedly asking a child to discuss feelings may make them withdraw further. The goal is to create safety and availability, not to produce a particular emotional response.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Changing the subject when the person is mentioned or answering with only a few words.
- Preferring play, sports, art, music, friends, or ordinary routines to grief conversations.
- Talking unexpectedly in the car, at bedtime, during an activity, or weeks after adults thought the moment had passed.

GENTLE REMINDER

Do not force a child to talk in order to prove they are grieving. Presence, play, routine, creativity, and quiet companionship can all be meaningful forms of support.

KEEP INVITATIONS LOW-PRESSURE

Let the child know you are available without repeatedly checking whether they are ready. A simple statement such as, “You never have to talk before you want to, but you can always come to me,” can communicate openness without pressure.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: “You do not have to talk right now.” “I am here if a question comes up later.” “We can sit together without talking.” “Would you rather draw, take a walk, or do something else?”

NOTICE OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

Play themes, drawings, music, stories, body complaints, behavior, questions, and changes in routine may communicate what words do not. Observe with curiosity, but avoid assuming every action has a hidden grief meaning.





MAKE INFORMATION AVAILABLE

A child who does not want to discuss feelings may still need factual information. Continue to answer practical questions about the death, routines, funerals, family changes, and safety. Silence about emotion should not become silence about important facts.

PROTECT PRIVACY WITHOUT CREATING SECRECY

- Older children and teens may prefer to speak with a friend, teacher, counselor, relative, or another trusted adult. Supporting another safe relationship is not a rejection of the caregiver. Children benefit from having more than one place to turn.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- A child who does not talk now may return to the loss months or years later. As understanding develops, new questions and feelings can emerge. Keep the person's name and the subject of the death available without forcing conversation.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Keep the door open without standing in the doorway. Children are more likely to speak when they know they can choose the timing.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What happens when adults mention the death? Does this child seem to need less pressure, a different setting, another trusted person, or a nonverbal way to express themselves?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Silence alone is not necessarily a problem. Seek additional support when withdrawal is persistent and accompanied by significant changes in functioning, severe anxiety or depression, traumatic reactions, self-harm, or safety concerns.

A GENTLE CLOSING

Children do not owe adults a grief conversation. A caring adult can remain present, attentive, and open while allowing the child to choose when, where, and how words become part of their grief.

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