



## HELPING CHILDREN EXPRESS FEELINGS THEY CANNOT PUT INTO WORDS

*Using Play, Art, Movement, and Connection to  
Support Grieving Children*

Grieving children do not always have the vocabulary to explain what is happening inside them. They may feel sadness, anger, fear, confusion, guilt, relief, longing, or several emotions at once without knowing how to name them. Expression can happen through many forms, not only conversation.

### UNDERSTANDING WHAT MAY BE HAPPENING

A child's ability to identify and describe emotions develops over time. Grief can also be physically and emotionally overwhelming. When words are difficult, children may communicate through play, drawings, stories, movement, music, behavior, questions, or simply wanting to be near a trusted adult.

### WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- The child changes the subject when feelings are discussed but expresses themes of loss in play or art.
- They become restless, irritable, quiet, or physically active when emotions rise.
- They say "I don't know" when asked how they feel, even though their behavior suggests distress.

### GENTLE REMINDER

Talking is only one language of grief. Children may show what they are carrying long before they can explain it.

### HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Offer opportunities rather than demands. Put out art supplies, take a walk, build something together, look at photographs, listen to music, or invite the child to choose a memory activity. Being alongside a child can make expression easier than sitting face-to-face and asking repeated questions.

### WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "You don't have to have a word for it." "Would you rather draw it, show me, or just sit together?" "I noticed you got very quiet when we talked about the funeral." Observations are often less pressuring than asking, "How do you feel?" over and over.

### A DEEPER LOOK

Adults should be cautious about interpreting a child's drawing, play theme, or behavior as having one fixed meaning. Instead of deciding what it represents, ask open questions such as, "Tell me about what you made," or simply stay present and let the child decide whether to explain.





### **CREATIVE WAYS TO EXPRESS GRIEF**

Children may make a memory box, draw a favorite memory, write or dictate a letter, create a playlist, build a scrapbook, use clay, move their bodies, tell a story, or choose an object that reminds them of the person. The activity should fit the child rather than becoming another assignment.

### **WHEN SILENCE IS THE CHILD'S CHOICE**

Some children need quiet before they are ready to express anything. Respecting silence while remaining emotionally available communicates that the door is open. Connection can happen through shared activities even when very few words are spoken.

### **REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS**

The child's preferred ways of expressing grief may change with age. A child who once used play may later prefer writing, music, friends, sports, faith practices, or conversation.

#### **A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU**

Sometimes the most helpful invitation is not "Tell me how you feel," but "I am here with you, however you want to show me."

### **A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION**

How does this child naturally communicate when something is difficult? What form of expression feels most comfortable and least pressured for them?

### **WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP**

If the child appears persistently overwhelmed, withdrawn, highly distressed, or unable to function in everyday settings, a qualified child mental-health professional can provide additional ways to support emotional expression.

### **A GENTLE CLOSING**

The goal is not to make a child talk. It is to create enough safety, patience, and opportunity that feelings have somewhere to go when the child is ready.

What does this child naturally reach for - words, play, art, movement, music, quiet, or closeness - when emotions are difficult?

### **CREATE INVITATIONS, NOT ASSIGNMENTS**

A memory activity is most helpful when the child has choice. Offer two or three possibilities and allow them to decline. A child may want to draw today and talk another day, or may prefer to keep something private. Respecting choice gives the child some sense of control at a time when much has happened outside their control.

Adults can participate alongside the child rather than observing from across the room. Drawing your own memory, taking a walk together, or looking through photographs side by side can make emotional expression feel more natural and less like an interview.

