



WHEN OTHER CHILDREN DON'T UNDERSTAND THEIR GRIEF

*Helping a Grieving Child Navigate Friends,
Classmates, and Hurtful Reactions*

Children often return to a peer world that has little experience with grief. Friends and classmates may care deeply but not know what to say. Some may avoid the child, ask uncomfortable questions, make insensitive comments, or expect everything to return to normal quickly. Helping a grieving child prepare for these reactions can reduce isolation and give them choices about what they want to share.

PEERS MAY NOT KNOW HOW TO RESPOND

Children learn about grief at different ages and through different experiences. A classmate may change the subject, stare, ask blunt questions, repeat rumors, or say something intended to help that instead hurts. These reactions do not necessarily mean the child is uncaring; they may reflect discomfort or lack of understanding.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Feeling different from classmates or believing no one their age understands.
- Avoiding friends because questions feel exhausting or because ordinary conversations now seem unimportant.
- Becoming angry, embarrassed, or hurt when peers say the wrong thing or stop mentioning the person who died.

GENTLE REMINDER

A child can want friends nearby without wanting to talk about the death. Companionship itself can be a meaningful form of support.

HELP THE CHILD CHOOSE WHAT TO SHARE

The child does not owe everyone the story of the death. Practice short responses that fit different situations. They might say, "I don't want to talk about it right now," "Thanks for asking," or "I would rather just hang out today."

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "Your friends may not know what to say." "You get to decide how much you tell people." "If someone says something hurtful, you can walk away or tell an adult." "It is okay to want normal time with friends and grief time too."

HELP FRIENDS SUPPORT WITHOUT MAKING THE CHILD DIFFERENT

When appropriate and with the child's permission, a teacher or trusted adult can give peers simple guidance: include the child, do not pressure them to talk, respect privacy, and continue inviting them to ordinary activities.





MAKE ROOM FOR CHANGING FRIENDSHIPS

Loss can change what feels important and whom a child feels comfortable with. Some friendships deepen; others become harder. Avoid forcing the child to remain close to someone who repeatedly dismisses or mocks their grief.

CONNECT WITH OTHERS WHO UNDERSTAND

- A grief group, camp, peer program, or another bereaved child can reduce the feeling of being the only one. Shared experience is not required for friendship, but sometimes it is relieving to meet someone who understands without a long explanation.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- Peer relationships become increasingly important as children grow. Adolescents may be especially sensitive to feeling different, being watched, or having private information shared. Include them in decisions about what school and peers are told.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

The goal is not for every peer to understand grief perfectly. It is for the grieving child to have respect, choice, belonging, and at least a few safe people.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What peer situation feels hardest for this child right now? Would a prepared response, trusted friend, teacher support, or connection with another bereaved child make it easier?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Seek additional support if bullying, social isolation, school refusal, persistent withdrawal, severe anxiety, depression, self-harm, or safety concerns develop.

A GENTLE CLOSING

Children should not have to educate every friend about grief. Adults can help them protect their privacy, find supportive people, and remain connected to ordinary childhood relationships while carrying an experience many peers may not yet understand.

What peer situation feels hardest for this child right now? Would a prepared response, trusted friend, teacher support, or connection with another bereaved child make it easier?

