



What to Expect When Campers Return Home

It is time once again for Camp Erin Toronto! It will be an amazing opportunity for kids and teenagers to get to know one another and to recognize other young people living with death and grief just like they are. They will have the chance to share their experiences, to teach and to learn from one another, and to simply enjoy being together while having a great time at camp!

One of the special things about Camp Erin is this balance of having fun at the same time as exploring ways to support one another, to care for ourselves and to live with grief. After last year's Camp Erin we heard lots of campers talk about what a great time they had, as well as telling us how helpful it was to have a chance to express and make sense of some of their intense feelings. We know that kids and teenagers will experience a wide range of emotions at camp and we wanted to give you some idea of what to expect and how you can help them when they come home.



Caring for young people who are grieving

Family members, friends and caregivers who are helping a child to understand and grieve — when they themselves are also grieving — often feel overwhelmed and helpless. Despite these feelings, you can help. When a loved one has died, we may wish we could “fix” the situation or prevent children from suffering. But we can best support kids in their struggle to live with and make sense of what is happening by talking with them frequently about their experience and including them in the family’s grieving.

Young people feel stronger knowing they can share their thoughts, questions, and concerns with loving and supportive adults. They need to know that there are no wrong or bad feelings or thoughts, and that they don’t have to “be strong” or “hold it together.” Explain that it is common to feel a range of emotions and it is important to share them. Encourage healthy ways for kids to express their feelings such as through sports, art, crafts, music, dancing, writing, or talking to someone they trust.



Camp Erin will provide a safe and supportive environment for campers to have opportunities to think about, express and just be with the range of feelings that come with grief. However, we also want to make sure that every camper knows that they will NEVER be encouraged to share their thoughts or feelings if they do not want to. We have a “free pass” rule that can be used anytime that a camper is uncomfortable talking about dying, death or grief.

After spending a weekend full of such a wide range of intense emotions – the excitement and adventure of camp, the joy and comfort of new friends, the grief expressed and shared with others and the challenges of being away from home – it is natural for campers’ feelings to be closer to the surface for a while after returning home. Some kids and teenagers will talk a mile-a-minute about their experiences, others will need quiet time to themselves in order to process and reflect. Silly behaviour or active play will offer an outlet for some young peoples’ emotions while tears and hugs will help others’. Each of these reactions is a natural way for young people to release some of their feelings; although it can sometimes seem “messy”, it is a natural part of grief.

Although we want to encourage young people to express how they’re feeling, if they are doing so in a way that is harmful to themselves or to someone else, we need to redirect their behaviour. If this happens with your child, explain the difference between emotions (what we *feel*) and behaviors (what we *do*). Then you can remind them that although some behaviors are not acceptable, such as hurting themselves or others, there is nothing wrong with having the emotions that lead to those behaviors. Young people often need help finding healthy ways to let those feelings out. After camp is a great time to ask them about some of the different activities that they participated in that gave them a chance to express their emotions, and see if there are ways those activities could be adapted to be used in other settings.

What every family should know about grief

Many people in our society feel uncomfortable talking about death and grief because it involves many hard emotions and because many people are afraid of dying. But it is natural to wonder about illness, death and grief and to have many questions. Talking about these things can help us to understand these important facts of life better and to know that we are not alone in our wonderings and worries, even if we can't find answers to all of our questions. Here are some things to think and talk about together:

- Grief is a normal and natural process following a loss. Although we usually think of grief as a response to the death of a family member, a friend or even a pet, it is also natural to experience grief because of a serious illness or injury, a divorce/separation, being bullied or hurt, moving, or having something important to you stolen or destroyed.
- Sometimes people think of grief as being sadness, but it involves **all kinds of feelings**, including anger, guilt, worry, numbness, relief, etc. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but people run into trouble when they try not to grieve at all.
- Even though it is something we will all experience, it can feel as though you are the only person in the world who feels this way.
- It can be hard to be with all the feelings that grief brings. This is partly because of just how strong and complex these feelings can be, but can be even harder because people in this society are very shy or embarrassed about their feelings often, and feel uncomfortable (ashamed, "weak") sharing them. But being tough isn't always healthy - bringing our experiences and feelings out into the open and caring for ourselves and each other is one of the best things about being human.

It is important to talk about what grief is, so you can recognize it when it happens, and so you don't feel helpless when it is happening to you or someone around you.



How can grief impact us?

Grief can feel different at different times and for different people, even people in the same family. This is natural since each person had a unique relationship with the person who died. Some of the things that a person might notice include:

- **Emotional** – having nightmares, feeling numb, anxious, irritable, anger at the person who died or at someone or something else, scared for their own safety or the safety of the family, feeling like they're going crazy, feeling sad, confused, shocked, lonely, betrayed, jealous, guilty, overwhelmed and sometimes happy or relieved.
- **Physical** – feeling exhausted, having headaches or stomachaches, tight jaw, feeling restless, hungry more or less than before, feeling a lump in throat, stomach in knots or a tightness in the chest.
- **Mental/Attitudinal** – having trouble concentrating and paying attention, forgetfulness, having trouble sleeping (can't stop thinking/worrying), not knowing how to relate to friends or wanting to be alone, not caring about the future.
- **Spiritual** – wondering "why me/my family?", anger at God, feeling that there is no point getting close to anyone if we all die, questioning the meaning of life

While these are all common and natural parts of grief, it is easy to see why it is important to have support through this experience. If a person ever begins to think about hurting themselves or another person, it is very important to get professional help right away.

Taking care of yourselves

It can be hard to know what to do and how to help when someone is grieving, including yourself. Grieving can be like a cut – it heals itself in its own time, not when we want it to heal. For some people a death and grief make everything feel different, and it feels like learning to be a new person in a new world; that can take a long time. Some kinds of grief take weeks or months, some take years and years. All we can do is take care of ourselves and each other and our grief for as long as it's needed. Whether it's yourself or someone else you're trying to support, here are some things to keep in mind:



- Sometimes people don't say anything because they are afraid that they will say the wrong thing, or make a person sadder, but most people would rather have their grief acknowledged. Asking "Do you want to talk about how you are feeling today?" gives someone a chance to let their feelings out. One of most important ways to help someone who is grieving is to just LISTEN.
- Be sensitive to their wishes for privacy. You can let the grieving person know you are there for him or her but also let them know that you're there to listen when they want to talk, not when you want them to.
- Kids who are grieving usually still want to do "regular stuff" too. Playing, staying involved in teams, groups and activities can be really helpful. Being around familiar people, doing things they enjoy doing and keeping a routine all help kids feel that even though so much has changed, some things can stay the same and life can go on.

Checking-in after Camp Erin

When they feel so many intense emotions, it can take some time for children and teenagers to sort out their thoughts and feelings. It can be very helpful for them to have a supportive adult to help them talk through these things. You can start by asking questions like,

- “How was camp for you?”
- “What was it like for you to see other kids who’d had someone close to them die?”
- “Was there anything that surprised you?”
- “Is there anything that you had questions about?”
- “Was there anything that was hard for you to see or hear?”
- “Was there anything that felt helpful for you?”

Children and teenagers may need more time to think about these things before they’re able to find the words to talk about it. If that’s the case, let them know you’re available to talk about it another time and make sure to check in with them again the next day or a couple of days later.

Literary Resources for Children

Brown, L. K. (1996). *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*.
Mellonie, B. (1983). *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*.
Hanson, W. (1997). *The Next Place*.
Schweibert, P., & DeKlyen, C. (1999). *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*.
Goldman, L. (2005). *Children Also Grieve: Talking about Death and Healing*.
Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*.
White, E. B. (1974). *Charlotte's Web*.

Literary Resources for Teenagers (fiction)

Blume, Judy. (1987). *Tiger Eyes*.
Bauer, Marion Dane. (1986). *On My Honor*.
Lloyd, Carole (1997). *The Charlie Barber Treatment*.

Literary Resources for Teenagers (non-fiction)

Heegaard, Marge Eaton (1990). *Coping with Death and Grief*.
Kremetz, Jill. (1988). *How it Feels When a Parent Dies*.
Rofes, Eric E. and 'The Unit' at Fayerweather Street School. (1985). *The Kids' Book About Death and Dying: By and For Kids*.
Grollman, Earl A. (1999). *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*.

Literary Resources for Caregivers

Eaton Russell, C. (2007). *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children and Teenagers*.
Hamilton, Joan. (2001). *When a Parent is Sick. Helping Parents Explain Serious Illness to Children*.
Silverman, P. R. (1999). *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives*.
Worden, W. (1996). *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*.
The Dougy Centre. (2004). *Helping Teens Cope with Death*.
The Dougy Centre. (2004). *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*.

Web resources for children and teenagers

Winston's Wish, <http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/default.asp>
Bereaved families of Ontario website for kids by kids www.soul2soul.ca/ (teens)
www.rd4u.org.uk/ (teens)
Kid's help phone, www.kidshelpphone.ca, 1-800-668-6868 (kids and teens)
Youth mental health site created by youth, <http://www.mindyourmind.ca/index.html>
Depression information for youth, www.beyondblue.org.au

Web resources for adults

Bereaved families of Ontario <http://www.bfotoronto.ca/>
Association for Death Education and Counselling, <http://www.adec.org/coping/index.cfm>
GriefNet <http://www.griefnet.org/>
AARP Grief and Loss Resources, <http://www.aarp.org/>
Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, <http://www.grief.org.au/>
Centering Corp., <http://www.centering.org/>
Gift From Within, <http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/articles.html>
Grief's Journey, <http://www.griefsjourney.com/>
GriefZone, <http://www.americanhospice.org/griefzone/index.htm>