

Supporting Grieving Kids and Teenagers During the Holidays

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.

Children 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.

Why during the Holidays?

After a parent has died, the grief that children and teenagers experience will change over time. Some days are harder than others, for kids just as they are for adults, no matter how much time has passed since the death. Special days like birthdays and winter holidays can be especially difficult, stirring up feelings of grief for the whole family. Even though these days may be difficult, they also offer important and meaningful opportunities for family members to remember the person who died, to be together, to share their memories, their feelings and to support one another.

We hope that this handout will support discussion in the family about what you and your child are thinking and feeling about the Holidays.



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 & 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, 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 often very shy or embarrassed about their feelings, 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 the person more sad, 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 with kids during the holidays and other occasions

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 that for you?”
- “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*.



For Teens

- Abelove, Joan. (1999). *Saying It Out Loud*.
Blume, Judy (1987). *Tiger Eyes*.
Gibbons, Alan (2004). *The Lost Boys' Appreciation Society*.
Grollman, Earl A. (1999). *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*.
Heegaard, Marge Eaton (1990). *Coping with Death and Grief*.
Hermes, Patricia. (1982). *You Shouldn't Have to Say Goodbye*.
Lloyd, Carole (1997). *The Charlie Barber Treatment*.
Moon, Pat (2003). *The Spying Game*.
Wilson, Jacqueline (1996). *Double Act*.

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*.

The Dr. Jay Children's Grief Centre offers education, counselling support, and medical care in the community and at our Centre to children and families where a child is dying or where children are grieving the dying or death of a loved one. We also provide consultation and education for healthcare professionals, children's mental health providers, and boards of education.

You can find more information on how to support children and youth through grief in *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children*, a 61-page book produced by Dr. Jay Children's Grief Centre. The book is for adults who know young people who will experience - or have experienced - the dying and death of a loved one, regardless of age, relationship, or the nature of the death. To order your copy of *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children*, e-mail us at info@griefcentre.org or call us at 416-360-1111.