



The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss  
Bereavement Center and  
The Robertson Bereavement Center

## Welcome to the Parent Toolkit for Grief and Loss

In recognition of the need to make more support available and accessible to parents of grieving children, we have developed a toolkit exclusively designed to provide pertinent information to parents about normal, healthy grieving during childhood. The toolkit contains substantive guidance about the experience of grieving children, helpful tips on how to best support grieving children and suggestions for coping with specific grief-related experiences.

The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Bereavement Center of Hospice of the Western Reserve is a community-based grief support program that provides services throughout Northern Ohio. We offer support to anyone who has experienced a loss due to death, regardless of ability to pay.

In this toolkit, you will find guiding support for the following grief related themes:

- **Existing Grief Support Resources**
  - Overview of Bereavement Center Programs
  - Overview of School Services
  - Listing of Current Community-Based Support Groups
- **Supportive Guides**
  - The parent's guide to the grieving child
  - Normal grief feelings
  - When supporting a grieving child
  - Helpful suggestions for helping a child cope with death
  - Support systems
  - The importance of remembrance
  - Helping children with the BIG feelings of grief
  - Supporting adolescents through grief
  - Finding the right words
  - Helping children grieve the loss of a pet
  - Handling the holidays with grieving children
  - Guidelines for children and funerals
  - Grieving child's resource list

It is our hope that in utilizing this toolkit, parents of grieving children will know that they are not alone. Support is available through a variety of programs offered by the bereavement center. Please feel free to contact us at 216.486.6838 or visit the [bereavement center's website](#) for more information.

Sincerely,

Diane Snyder Cowan, Director

The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Bereavement Center of Hospice of the Western Reserve  
300 East 185<sup>th</sup> Street, Cleveland, Ohio 44119-1330  
800.707.8922    [hospicewr.org](http://hospicewr.org)  
Serving Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain and Summit Counties with offices throughout.



## **Parent's Guide to the Grieving Child**

### **Do:**

- Be available to listen.
- Follow routines, they provide a sense of safety and comfort.
- Contact the school after the death and direct school staff about what should be shared and your comfort level with school grief support.
- Prepare child for return to school by making a plan with the child and school to establish a safe place to be alone at school if needed.
- Identify a safe person the child may talk with at school.
- Modify academic expectations as needed.
- Set limits and address risk taking behavior immediately.

### **Do Say:**

- "I'm sorry."
- "I know you are sad/angry/in pain..."
- "This must be a hard time for you..."
- "I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking."
- "It can be hard to understand why these things happen."
- "Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable."
- "Expressing your tears and pain can help you through this hard time."

### **Do not:**

- Act as if nothing happened.
- Make statements about how people will or will not feel in the future.
- Force a child to talk about his/her feelings; assure your willingness to listen when he/she is ready.
- Assume that the child is coping well, even if he/she appears to be.
- Take a grieving child's anger personally.
- Neglect your own grieving process; this will spill over and affect your child.
- Allow your own emotions to get in the way of being helpful.
- Expect the child to finish all assignments on time.

### **Avoid Saying:**

- "You will get over it."
- "You should be over this by now."
- "I know just how you feel."
- "You should/shouldn't feel like..."
- "Count your blessings..."
- "Things could be worse..."
- "Your loved one is better off."
- "You'll be stronger for this."
- "Be strong for your mother, siblings, etc."
- "God has a reason for everything, even this."
- "This was God's will."

## Normal Grief Feelings

It is normal for a grieving child to express any of the feelings listed here. It is important to provide grieving children with the safety, acceptance and support they need to cope with these normal grief reactions in a healthy way.

Alienated

Angry

Anxious

Apathetic

Cautious

Confused

Depressed

Disappointed

Exhausted

Fearful

Frightened

Frustrated

Guilty

Helpless

Hostile

Hurt

Hysterical

Lonely

Pained

Paranoid

Regretful

Sad

Shock

Withdrawn





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## **When supporting a grieving child...**

- answer the questions they ask, even the hard ones.
- give the child choices whenever possible.
- talk about and remember the person who died.

## **The following guidelines can be helpful when supporting a grieving child:**

1. Accept your sorrow-----take time to grieve.
2. Talk about it-----find family/friends to talk to.
3. Keep busy-----do purposeful work that occupies your mind.
4. Eat well and exercise-----take care of your body.
5. Remembrance-----find creative ways to keep memories alive.
6. Keep a journal-----record your feelings in a safe place.
7. Seek inner strength-----set aside time for peace of mind.
8. Seek help-----look to family and friends for extra support.



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## **Helpful suggestions for helping a child cope with death:**

1. When talking to a child about a tragedy, find out what they know or think they know has happened. Children may be aware of more than you think.
2. Answer any questions simply and honestly, but only offer the details that they can absorb.
3. Let them know you will be available to listen. When they are ready to talk—listen.
4. Let the child have time to grieve, be upset and talk about their fears. Validate their feelings and provide reassurance.
5. Give the child different ways of expressing his or her grief—verbal, written, creative, musical and physical.
6. Allowing the child to go outside and play can be a good way to run off the anxiety they may sense from the adults and feel themselves.
7. Try and keep regular routines. Children can grieve a change in behavior and mourn the environment and the predictability of a schedule that existed before the loss or death. Keeping regular routines can help.
8. Be patient and flexible. Children grieve intermittently. They may cry one moment and then play normally the next.
9. Remember it takes time for a child to recover from a loss. The healing process depends on the type of loss and the relationship with the deceased person, pet, object etc. This could be months or years.
10. Validate the reality that although a child will usually recover from a loss in his/her own time, they will always feel some level of the loss especially when triggered by a memory. This is normal and can contribute to healing if the child is supported, validated and loved.

## Support Systems

A support system is the group of people in your life that you can turn to for help in times of need and who can turn to you in times of need. They are members of your inner-circle and outer-circle. They may include your close friends, family members, members of the clergy, people in your community and professional counselors.



Support systems can play an important role in grief for adults and children.

**Children need to feel safety, love and acceptance when experiencing the big feelings of grief.** Often, this can be difficult for adults to provide, particularly if they are overwhelmed with their own grief. This is an example of a time when turning to a close friend, a relative or spiritual leader for help may be appropriate. Utilizing your support system can be helpful to the entire family system, supporting the grieving child in the process.



## **The Importance of Remembrance**

Fostering the memories of a child's deceased loved one can help them to process grief. It can be comforting to know that the memories they have of their special person can never be taken away. Sometimes, remembering a special person who died triggers big feelings. This is a normal part of the grieving process. The key is to have a plan for how to cope with those big feelings. Through discussion and modeling, children can learn healthy coping from the adults in their lives.

### **Supporting a grieving child starts with:**

- Being honest
- Answering questions
- Describing feelings and reactions of grief
- Following routines, with some flexibility
- Avoiding use of phrases like "You'll get over it"
- Being available to provide love and support
- Including children in funeral planning
- Not using euphemisms like "he's sleeping" or "she went away"
- Understanding a grieving child's anger as grief

### **Things you can say:**

- "I'm sorry"
- "This is such a hard time for you"
- "I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking"
- "Let's talk about what might make you more comfortable here"
- "Crying can help you through this hard time"
- "I know you are sad/angry/in pain..."
- "It can be hard to understand why things like this happen"



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## Helping Children with the BIG Feelings of Grief

The impact of death is overwhelming for children, especially as they deal with the rigors of school, stressful peer interactions, and changes at home. Often, children are not equipped with the skills needed to deal with these “BIG” feelings of grief. Unfortunately, in the weeks and months following a death, the adults that have helped them cope in the past are very busy with their own emotions and life changes. If unexpressed, feelings intensify and become even more difficult for a child to manage. Here are several ideas for helping children with their “BIG” feelings of grief:

- **Use honesty and simplicity** when describing what happened. Children may become confused with inaccurate terms to describe dying, such as, “your grandpa is sleeping,” “we lost your mother today,” “your aunt passed away,” etc. Use words such as “dead” and “died”. Older children may want detailed descriptions of how the person died. Seek advice from a professional if you are unsure how or what to tell your child.
- **Be available to listen** when they are ready to talk. Sometimes children are not ready to talk when we are ready to listen. If so, tell them you can be available when they are ready. When listening, give your undivided attention (no calls or other interruptions).
- **Describe the feelings of grief** they could expect to have – sad, angry, guilty, scared, worried. Give examples of how you have dealt with some of these feelings. Address fears by telling them what you are doing to keep them safe and healthy. If the person died of illness, be sure to emphasize the fact that most people recover from illnesses.
- **Demonstrate and discuss appropriate ways to express feelings.** It is okay to share your sadness and tears with your children. Children may avoid activities or conversations to prevent their family members from crying or feeling sad. Reassure them that it’s okay if you cry after they say or do something and they are not responsible for your tears. Be sure they know that crying can help them feel better.

Understand that anger is important for children to express, and try not to take their anger personally. Give them ideas of how to let out anger without getting in trouble, i.e. punch a pillow, run fast, talk about it, etc. Feelings can also be expressed by writing, drawing, sculpting or doing other art projects.

- **Encourage involvement in memorializing activities.** If possible, include children in planning the funeral or memorial services. Be sure to explain what will happen during the different parts of the service.

Involve children in remembering activities: collecting photos, retelling their stories, or creating a memory box with mementos of your loved one. In addition, make plans to remember your loved one on special occasions and holidays.





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## Supporting Adolescents Through Grief

When death impacts the life of your child or teen, it is often overwhelming and difficult to know how to help, particularly if you are grieving the loss yourself. Parents often feel the desire to protect and shield their children from the pain, sadness and tragedy of death. Unfortunately, avoiding grief will not avoid heartache. Dismissing death and failing to acknowledge grief reactions can increase feelings of isolation and discourage teens from seeking support.

The following responses can assist in creating an open and empathic environment, opening the door for your child to share his feelings and to recognize that his grief is normal.

- Acknowledge and validate her sorrow; reassure that INTENSE feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, fear and helplessness will lessen with time.
- Be available to LISTEN and offer to do so often.
- Stick to routine, normalcy and structure. Reinforce safety and security after the loss of control associated with death.
- Encourage healthy eating, sleeping and exercise habits; reinforce the importance of good self-care.
- Discuss your family's religious or spiritual beliefs; offer to attend services or pray together.
- Give your child SPACE to grieve; allow time for letter writing, journaling, art or music activities, physical outlets, or spending time with friends.
- Include him in planning and attendance at funeral and memorial services.
- Offer to help connect her to resources such as school counselors or grief support groups.
- Ask if he would like a hug, you might be surprised at how often the answer is "YES"!



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## Finding the Right Words

Finding the right words to comfort someone who has experienced a death is challenging.

When that person is your child or teen, it becomes even more difficult. Often parents find themselves avoiding the topic altogether for fear that they will say the wrong thing.

The following are helpful responses that convey sincerity and demonstrate your recognition of their grief.

- *"I'm sorry"*
- *"It can be hard to understand why these things happen"*
- *"No, it's not fair"*
- *"This is such a hard time for you"*
- *"I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking"*
- *"I can't begin to understand how you are feeling"*
- *"How can I help?"*
- *"It's okay to cry"*

On the other hand, there are some response and clichés best to avoid. The following are often seen as unhelpful and even upsetting when offered to grieving children or teens.

- *"Be strong for your mother/ siblings, etc."*
- *"It was God's will"*
- *"You are the man/ woman of the house now"*
- *"I know just how you feel"*
- *"You will get over it"*
- *"You should/ shouldn't feel like..."*
- *"You should be over this by now"*
- *"You should count your blessings"*
- *"He/ she is better off/ in a better place"*

Remember that there are no magical words to take away the pain associated with death.

You don't have to say anything to show someone that you care. Often your presence alone says enough- that you are here and willing to listen.



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## **Helping Children Grieve the Loss of a Pet**

### **Understanding the special relationship between a child and his/her pet:**

- A family pet is a welcome member of any household, a companion and playmate that gives both pleasure and opportunities for learning.
- The love relationship between a child and pet is experienced in many ways.
- Children and teens completely involve themselves with their pets: they take charge of them, hold, feed, clean up after, and claim their pet as their own – “of their world”.
- Pets appear in children’s fantasies and dreams: poems and stories are written about turtles and birds, and children are transported into a fluid, graceful world as they watch their fish swim.
- When a pet dies, parents might be surprised by the intensity of the grief reactions children feel.

### **Preparing children to cope with loss through age-sensitive education:**

- Teaching death awareness throughout the child’s life.
- Accepting the many aspects of the grieving process when death occurs.
- Some deaths, such as when an animal declines with illness or must be euthanized, may be anticipated and discussed in advance.
- Talk directly to children avoid terms like “put to sleep” that might confuse children or cause anxiety in other parts of their lives.
- Anticipated deaths are full of feelings, regardless of how thoroughly the family is prepared.
- An accidental death is always hard.
- Persistent questioning, guilt, sometimes blame, and “what if’s?” are normal grief reactions.



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## **Helping Children Grieve the Loss of a Pet (Continued)**

### **As parents we can be a great comfort to our children by:**

- Creating a family atmosphere where losses can be felt and talked about.
- Helping children to:
  - Resist an impulse to escape the hard feelings by “replacing the pet” too quickly.
  - Understand that grief takes time and that the death pet has a special place in our lives.
- Careful decision-making about if/when to get another pet, taking into account each family member’s grieving process.

### **Helping children memorialize their pet can be healing:**

- A modest memorial for your pet can take on the unique features of your pet and your family.
- It is especially helpful when the memorial activity is geared to the developmental age of the children, includes some elements of the uniqueness of the pet, and reflects family traditions and history.
- With pets as with people, poems, pictures, music, hugs, laughter, memories and tears help you retain and access memories of your special relationship with your pet.



## **Handling the Holidays with Grieving Children**

The holidays are traditionally a time of joy and coming together with loved ones, but when someone in our life dies, the spirit of the season may not be as bright. For grieving children, the holidays can still be an exciting time of the year and the following tips are ways for you as a family to cope through the holidays.

1. **Remember children grieve differently than adults.** Children are able to separate their grief from the holiday.
2. **Take an active role in helping children cope.** Be tolerant of different behaviors children may display. Children are sometimes not as verbal as adults and need other ways to express their grief.
3. **Plan the holiday instead of letting it happen.** Build flexibility and compromise into your plan. The magic of the holidays is usually more exciting for children. To help maintain some of the magic, it is important they have security and structure during this time.
4. **Decide how your family would like to remember your loved one during the holidays.** You may want to set aside a special time during the day to share memories of your loved one who died.
5. **Give family members choices of how they would like to celebrate the holiday season.** Traditions provide a way for children to express thoughts and feelings. Most children will assume that you'll do the same things. They need to know if things are going to be different. Surprises can be unsettling. If you make a change this year, that doesn't mean it has to be forever.

## **Guidelines for Children and Funerals**

Often adults are unsure of how to deal with the topic of children and funerals. The following are suggestions for helping families make the decision of whether or not children should attend a funeral or service and how to prepare them for the experience.

### **Should Children Attend?**

- After the child is given some information about the funeral, wake or service, allow him/her to make the choice about whether or not to attend. However, if the child is given a choice, be prepared to follow through with the child's decision. Sometimes other people (friends / relatives) may voice disagreement with a child attending. Try to be firm in you and your child's decision.
- If the child chooses not to attend, other ways to say good-bye may be provided, either at this time or at a later date. It is never too late to say good-bye. A personal memorial service, a letter writing activity or another ritual can be done if the child wants.

### **Preparing the Child**

- Discuss the events of the day step by step, including the service, procession and cemetery.
- To the best of your ability, discuss the environment (i.e. what the funeral home will look like, smell like, etc.).
- If the deceased is in a closed casket, explain the reason for this and reinforce that the body is actually inside even though it can't be seen.
- If there will be an open casket, discuss what the body will look like; how it will feel (i.e. cool and hard, like a wall); that it will appear to be sleeping and review the differences between sleep and death (i.e. when you are dead you do not breathe and your heart does not beat); that it is OK to touch the body, if they choose.
- If the body is to be cremated, help the children understand that this is another way to take care of a body after it has died. You may say that a very hot heat quickly turns the body into ashes and that all the cremains or ashes are placed in a special container called an urn.
- Review what will be expected of the child.
- Discuss possible feelings that adults and children may experience and how these feeling may look (i.e. sadness and crying). Let children know that some people, including themselves, may be giggling or laughing. Explain that this does not mean that people are not sad, but that people experience a lot of different feelings for different reasons.



## **Grieving Child's Resource List**

### **General Death and Dying**

#### ***Appropriate for Preschool and School Age Children***

- Blackburn, L.B. (1991). **I Know I Made It Happen.** Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.
- Boritzer, E. (2000) **What is Death?** Santa Monica, CA: Veronica Lane Books.
- Buscaglia, L. (1982). **The Fall of Freddie the Leaf.** New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Holmes, M. (2000). **A Terrible Thing Happened.** Washington, DC: Magination Press.
- Joslin, M. (1998) **The Goodbye Boat.** Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Kent, J. (1975). **There's No Such Thing as a Dragon.** Racine, WI: Western.
- Krasny Brown, L. & Brown, M. (1996). **When Dinosaurs Die.** New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- LeShan, E. (1972). **What Makes Me Feel This Way.** New York, NY: Macmillan.

### **Death of a Parent**

#### ***Appropriate for Preschool Children***

- Clifton, L. (1983). **Everett Anderson's Good-bye.** New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Vigna, J. (1991). **Saying Good-bye to Daddy.** Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman and Company.

#### ***Appropriate for School Age Children***

- Carter, F. (1976). **The Education of Little Tree.** Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Holmes, M. (1999). **Molly's Mom Died.** Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.
- Holmes, M. (1999). **Sam's Dad Died.** Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.
- Powell, E.S. (1990). **Geranium Morning.** Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books
- Tiffault, E. (1992). **A Quilt For Elizabeth.** Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

### **Death of a Sibling**

#### ***Appropriate for Preschool Children***

- Johnson, J. & Jampolsky, G. (Eds.). (1982). **Another Look at the Rainbow.** Berkely, CA: Celestial Arts.
- Romond, J. (1989). **Children Facing Grief: Letters From Bereaved Brothers and Sisters.** St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press.

#### ***Appropriate for School Age Children***

- Alexander, S. (1983). **Nadia The Willful.** New York, NY: Random House.
- Murray, G. & Jampolsky G. (Eds.) (1982). **Another Look at the Rainbow.** Berkely, CA: Celestial Arts.
- Romond, J. (1989). **Children Facing Grief: Letters From Bereaved Brothers and Sisters.** St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press.

### **Death of a Friend**

#### ***School Age Children***

- Bahr, M. (2000). **If Nathan Were Here.** Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.
- Clardy, A.F. (1984). **Dusty Was My Friend.** New York, NY: Human Sciences Press.
- Cohn, J. (1987). **I Had a Friend Named Peter.** New York, NY: Morrow and Company.
- Jeffs, S. & Thomas, J. (2006). **JOSH.** Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Jordan, M. (1989). **Losing Uncle Tim.** Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman and Company.
- Kaldhol, M. & Oyen, W. (1987). **Good-bye Rune.** Brooklyn, NY: Kane/Miller.
- Smith, D. (1973). **A Taste of Blackberries.** New York, NY: Thomas Crowell.
- Romond, J. (1989). **Children Facing Grief: Letters From Bereaved Brothers and Sisters.** St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press.

# The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Bereavement Center

A community-based grief support program that provides services throughout Northern Ohio to anyone who has experienced a loss due to death.

Our mission is to assist the bereaved as they move through the grief processes by providing support groups, education and training, consultation, bereavement counseling, and crisis response to the bereaved and those who work with them.

## MONTHLY AND SIX WEEK SUPPORT GROUPS

- Groups for adults, children and teens at various community locations
- Death of a child
- Spousal loss
- Orphaned adults
- Older adults
- School or work related deaths

## GRIEF COUNSELING

- Loss due to death
- Anticipatory grief
- Individual counseling for adults, children and teens

## COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

- Holiday and family programs
- Memorial service
- Education series
- Children's camps

## PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

- Consultation
- Resource and referral
- Training and workshops
- Student placements

## SCHOOL OUTREACH

- Grief support for students, staff and parents
- On-site crisis response
- On-site student groups
- Staff consultation and training
- Classroom presentations and interventions
- Parent and student education
- Wellness and life skills

## WORKPLACE SERVICES

- Management training
- Consultation
- On-site crisis response
- Employee education

## CRISIS RESPONSE

- Local deaths and tragic events
- Pre-incident education
- Defusings and debriefings
- On-site support

## WELLNESS PROGRAMS

- Massotherapy
- Expressive Therapies
- Yoga

For more  
information or  
to enroll, call  
**216.486.6838**



The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss  
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*Serving Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain and Summit Counties with offices throughout.*

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# Grief Services for Schools



## Grief Support

For students and staff before or after the death of a student, staff member or community member.

- Short and long term grief groups
- Administrative consultation
- Staff support

## Classroom Presentations

Curriculum for elementary, middle and high school classes. Topics include:

- End of life
- Anticipating a death
- Common grief reactions
- Coping with death
- Traumatic death
- Supporting a grieving friend

## Crisis Response Services

Immediate, on-site support for administrators, staff, students and parents. Collaboration with community and school crisis response team members. Crisis management services include:

- Strategic planning
- Large group interventions
- Small group interventions
- Education
- Follow-up support

## Staff Training

Topics include:

- Overview of grief and loss
- Anticipatory grief
- Children and teen grief
- Traumatic grief
- Supporting students through loss
- Grief activities for the classroom
- School crisis response
- Creative Interventions



## Parent Education Programs

Information and support for parents dealing with their children's grief reactions.

## Program Development and Consultation

Consultation services available for program planning and support before and after a death.

*Fees vary according to services, and can be waived under certain circumstances. No one in need of services will be turned away because of financial need.*



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