

TALKING TO A CHILD OR YOUTH ABOUT

Death



AN OVERVIEW WRITTEN BY THE
KEMP CARE NETWORK
GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT TEAM



Kemp Care
Network



Grief and Bereavement
Centre of Excellence

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THIS BOOKLET IS A RESOURCE TO HELP GUARDIANS SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH. IT INCLUDES A VARIETY OF INFORMATION, TO GUIDE CHILDREN AND YOUTH THAT MAY HAVE QUESTIONS REGARDING DEATH OR DYING.

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Death and Dying

When death is brought up, what do you instantly think of? Maybe it's a specific person, a certain feeling, colour, or a place. There could be a few things we think of, or feelings we experience.

If someone approached you and asked how familiar you were with death as a child, what would your response be? What kinds of conversations were you having with your family as a child? Think about your child now, what would they say?

As a parent or caregiver, when you think about death, you may also get a sinking feeling in your stomach, that talking about death isn't something we should do with our children. That by bringing up this conversation, it will harm them, and not protect them.

In reality, these conversations are things we “must do” as parents and caregivers.

Death is part of our living! Grief is as natural as the seasons changing. If we allow our children to talk about death to us, we can provide correct and concise information back to them to prepare them for crisis. To let them know that it's okay that they are grieving and feeling this way. By normalizing their grief, it will allow them to grieve more naturally in the future, and identify the support and resources available to them.

This booklet incorporates different activities, definitions, and tips for parents and caregivers who need some support in explaining death to their children/youth.

What You Need To Know

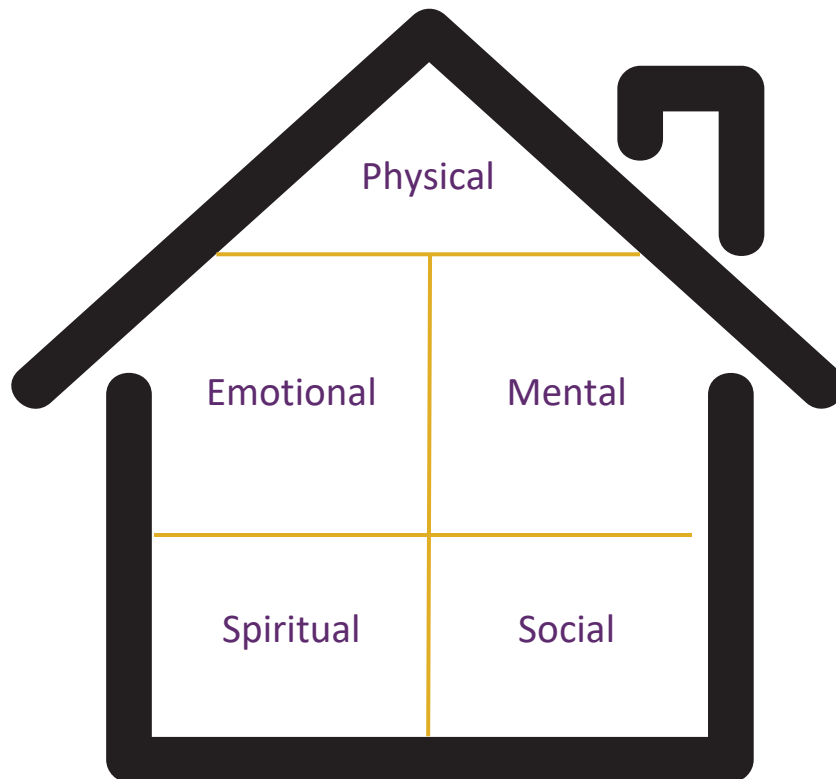
- Children and youth grieve differently than adults do
- They are experiencing physical, hormonal, and developmental changes, trying to figure out who they are outside of their families, and trying new things and meeting new people. So experiencing the death of someone important to them can feel disruptive as they develop more independence.
- Grief is a lifelong process, it can be activated at different times throughout our lifetime - at anniversaries, milestones, celebrations, etc. This, in part, is why support needs to be ongoing.
- The grief process can be interrupted if new challenges, deaths, or trauma occur.

PEMSS Model

There are many different grief theories and models. PEMSS is an acronym for one of these grief models. Everyone grieves in a different way, there are no limitations or restrictions around grief and bereavement.

Here is one way to look at it.

You are in a house with 5 different rooms. Each room gives you a different reaction and feeling when entering. In your time living at this house, you may visit all the rooms at some point, but there is always going to be one room that you go back to, and hang out in the most. This is similar to how one will go through their experiences of grief.



PEMSS Model



**What this could look like for you,
your child or youth.**



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PEMSS Model



Ways to support these grieverers

Remember!

Everyone grieves differently and has their own unique experiences. In families with multiple children, each child may handle their grief differently, so it is important not to compare their grief to each other.

Children are like flowers, some grow anywhere like Daisies, where some need more care like Orchids.

Children and Youth Responding to Death

Children: Ages 0-12	Emotions like sadness, anger, anxiety, shock, disbelief, denial, guilt, acceptance, and fear
	Talking a lot or not at all about the death
	Repetitive questions
	Puddle Jumping - moving rapidly from grief expressions to regular activities
	Fear and anxiety about themselves dying
	Crying and heightened sensitivity
	Clinging and longing
	Difficulty focusing and concentrating
	Withdrawal: decreased interest in school and activities, decline in marks or achievements
	Trouble falling asleep, sleeping more, nightmares
	Acting out: bullying, non-compliance with adults, irritability, clowning around
	Physical Symptoms: headaches, tummy aches, soreness, startling easily, crying
	Changes in eating habits, and activity levels
	Intense focusing and over achievement in school and activities

Children and Youth Responding to Death

Youth/Teens: Ages 13-17	Emotions like sadness, anger, anxiety, shock, disbelief, denial, guilt, acceptance, and fear
	Talking a lot or not at all about the death
	Talking about feelings, and questions with others, but not with family
	Fear and anxiety about themselves dying
	Crying and heightened sensitivity
	Intense longing for the person who has died including preoccupation with death and afterlife
	Seeking out “normal” activities as distractions
	Difficulty focusing and concentrating
	Intense focus and overachievement in school and activities
	Withdrawal: decreased interest in school and activities, decline in marks or achievements

Children and Youth Responding to Death

Youth/Teens: Ages 13-17	Sleeping issues: not falling asleep, sleeping more, nightmares
	Acting out: bullying, non-compliance with adults, irritability, clowning around
	Physical Symptoms: headaches, tummy ache, soreness, startling easily, crying
	Changes in eating habits, and activity levels
	Avoidance and isolation: fear of leaving home, avoiding school, less time with friends

How Can You Support?

- Be honest and open
- Listen openly without judgement
- Avoid substitution words: use “They have died” rather than “They have gone to a better place”
- Use age appropriate language
- Model self care: take care of yourself, seek support
- Acknowledge and validate the child/youth’s grief
- Accept and respect the child/youth’s feelings
- Acknowledge your own grief to teens
- Provide reassurance and validation
- Provide opportunities to talk about loved ones who have died
- Offer choices
- Provide opportunities to ask questions
- Allow them to participate in funeral, burials, memorial services, or other traditions as they seem fit
- Provide a consistent routine, with flexibility built in
- Maintain consistent rules and expectations
- Provide creative outlets
- Plan an “out” with teens for when they are in public and have an unexpected grief response
- Create rituals or spaces to honour the memory of those who have died
- Be patient
- Ask how you can help
- Share, but don’t force your beliefs about death; spiritual, religious, cultural, etc.
- If you don’t know what to say or cannot answer a question, be honest
- It’s okay not to know all the answers
- Remember you are not alone. We are here to help you navigate this difficult experience.

DO'S AND DON'TS AFTER DEATH

A list provided to us through the prospective of a griever.

DO'S

- Mention my loved one who died by name
- Please do not be afraid to talk about the person who died. Don't pretend that they didn't exist
- Use the words "dead" "died" "death"
- Be patient. It's okay to cry and show feelings and emotions, the intention is not to make others uncomfortable.
- Call and visit. Please don't wait for me to call you
- If you see one of us sitting alone please offer to sit with us
- If you call and invite us to join you at some function and we say no, please try another time
- Thinking of you texts, cards or notes on anniversaries, birthdays etc. are appreciated
- If we vent our anger toward you please forgive us
- Be happy when something good happens
- Help us laugh again
- Help us to keep the memory of our loved one alive

DO'S AND DON'TS AFTER DEATH

A list provided to us through the prospective of a griever.

DON'TS

- Please don't tell us that you know how we feel
- Please don't tell us "you are the man/woman of the house now; you have to take care of your mom/dad/siblings"
- Don't avoid talking to us about our loved one because you don't want to upset us
- Don't tell us to get over it
- Please don't minimize our loss
- Don't use cliches like "we all have to die sometimes"

DO'S AND DON'TS WITH LANGUAGE

DO'S	DONT'S	WHY?
Your brother has cancer	Your brother is very sick	Children may fear the person who is very sick, or confuse themselves with getting sick too
Daddy died today	Daddy has gone to a better place	A child might wonder why they cannot go to that place that their father is at, if it really is a "better" place
Your sister has died	Your sister went to heaven	Using language that a child or youth may not fully understand like heaven can be challenging to comprehend. This could cause fear of being taken there, or questioning as to why they can not go there
Grandma has died	Grandma has gone to sleep forever and will not wake up	Children/youth may experience a fear of sleeping from this, or wonder why their loved ones have not woken up
Mom died today	We lost your mother today	Terms like lost for children/ youth symbolize that they may be found. They may not understand why no one is looking for their loved ones, and why they can not find them.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES, AND HOW THEY IMPACT GRIEF

All children will grieve differently. This grief could be affected by their age, stage of development, previous experiences with death, and the relationship with the person who died. These developmental stages will assist you in your approach to explaining death, or supporting children/ youth during their grieving process.



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0-2 Years Old



Concept of Death: Death is experienced as separation or abandonment.

Grief Response: Infants rely on sense. They do not understand that the person is gone forever, however, can sense that they are no longer there.

Signs of Distress: Difficulty toileting, sleeping, clingy, temper tantrums, crying, regression.

How to Support: Simple honest explanations of death with familiar examples to help their understanding. Provide physical comfort and consistent routine.



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2-4 Years Old



Concept of Death: Death can be experienced as abandonment. Can believe death to be temporary, reversible, and contagious.

Grief Response: Intense, brief responses to death. Children will react to changes in routine and care. Asking repeated questions about the death. Anxious about their basic needs being met - “Will mom be able to take care of me alone.”

Signs of Distress: Regression, anxiety at bedtime, fear of abandonment, seek physical contact, irritability, tantrums

How to Support: Simple, honest explanations of death with repetition. Provide children with physical comfort and consistency. Reassure that death is not contagious, and that the child will be taken care of. Allow for some regression.

4-7 Years Old



Concept of Death: Death can be seen as temporary and reversible

Grief Response: Child may feel responsible for the death due to magical thinking (I told them I wish they would die). Repetitive questioning; why, how, what happened? Some children may act as though nothing has happened. Feelings of confusion and distress.

Signs of Distress: Overt signs: sadness, anger, fear, etc. Changes in eating and sleeping. May have nightmares. You may see more violent play and behavioural problems. May attempt to take on the role of the person who died. For example, a young boy would try to be like their father, if the father has died.

How to Support: Simple, honest explanations of the death. Try to avoid euphemisms (fell asleep and is now in the sky).

Provide them with opportunities to express their feelings, and give them coping strategies. Reassure they did not cause the death if the question does get asked.

8-11 YEARS OLD



Concept of Death: May still see death as reversible, however beginning to see it as final. May think that death is punishment for bad behaviors or thoughts.

Grief Response: Feeling angry or responsible, want to know details and specific questions. Concerned if others are reacting the same (like other kids). This age has more ability to mourn (outwardly express their grief) and understand death.

Signs of Distress: Overt signs, physical complaints, overactive to avoid thinking of death, feel ashamed and different from other children, problems in school, withdrawal from friends, acting out, concerns with body, role confusion.

How to Support: Open, honest explanation of death, answer questions, provide opportunity to express range of feelings, coping skills, physical outlets, reassure that they are not responsible.

12-18 YEARS OLD



Concept of Death: Death is inevitable, universal and irreversible, abstract thinking, can conceptualize death.

Grief Response: Depression, denial, repression, more talkative to others outside of family, embarrassment, place peer needs ahead, traditional mourning, not wanting people to know.

Signs of Distress: Depression, anger, non compliance, difficulty concentrating, withdrawal, engaging in high risk behaviours, suicidal ideation

How to Support: Communicate using direct open dialogue about death. Encourage verbalization and listen, however, do not force communication. Set consistent limits balanced with freedom and choices. Grief is life-long with no end point. Continue to support and honour this process through milestones, traditions, and special occasions.

BILL OF RIGHTS OF GRIEVING TEENS

CREATED BY THE DOUGY CENTRE

LOCATED IN PORTLAND OREGON

1. To know the truth about the death, the deceased, and the circumstances
2. To have questions answered honestly
3. To be heard with dignity and respect
4. To be silent and not tell you their grief emotions and thoughts
5. To not agree with your perceptions and conclusions
6. To see the person who died and place of death
7. To grieve any way they want to without hurting self or others
8. To feel all the feelings and think all the thoughts of their own unique grief
9. To not have to follow the “stages of grief”
10. To grieve in ones own unique way without censorship
11. To be angry at death, at the person who died, at God, at self, and at others
12. To have their own theological and philosophical beliefs about life and death
13. To no be taken advantage of in this vulnerable mourning condition and circumstances
14. To have guilt about how they could have intervened to stop the death

ACTIVITIES FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN/ YOUTH/TEENS

Memory Mailboxes: Use any type of box (Kleenex box, cardboard box, etc) if there is not a slit already in it, cut a small letter sized slit in the top. Write letters, share memories, pictures, anything that they wish to send to their person.

Journal: If they are hesitant to share things with others, encourage them to write down their own thoughts in a book. Have them pick out their own journal, and decorate it if they wish.

Finish the sentence: Write out sentence starters and have them finish them off. It is common for them to have a sense of uncomfortableness towards starting the conversation.

Memorials: Posting something on social media, creating a memorial where they had died etc.

Worry Doll: Create a pipe cleaner stick figure, and begin wrapping it up with yarn until you cover it completely. Give all these worries to your worry doll and hide it under your pillow at night.

RESOURCES FOR GRIEVING CHILDREN (3-17 YEARS)

Books are great resources to use when processing grief.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Something Very Sad Happened. By: Bonnie Zucker
- Why Do Things Die? By: Katie Daynes
- Life is Like the Wind. By: Shona Innes
- Ida Always. By: Caron Levis
- Cry Heart, But Never Break. By: Glenn Ringtved
- The Immortal Jellyfish. By: Sang Miao
- One Wave At A Time. By: Holly Thompson
- When You Trap A Tiger. By: Tae Keller
- I Felt a Funeral In My Brain. By: Will Walton
- Sorry For Your Loss. By: Jessie Ann Foley
- Hello Grief. Ill Be Right With You. By: Alessandra Olanow
- Welcome to the Grief Club. By: Janine Kwoh

OTHER RESOURCES

Kemp Care Network: <https://kempcarenetwork.org/>

Kids Grief: <https://www.kidsgrief.ca/>

National Alliance for Children's Grief: https://nacg.org/?srsltid=AfmBOor8jrnExYO7v7f9ej1VRXHTxuPGsQu_DVqkJ_TwOZ05GizQilzW

The Children's Grief Foundation of Canada:
<https://childrensgrieffoundation.org/>

Dougy Centre:
<https://www.dougy.org/>

Scan here for Kemp Care
Network specific grief and
bereavement support



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