

# Grief

A young Black man with short, dark hair is sitting on stone steps. He is wearing a white t-shirt under a dark, vertically striped button-down shirt. He is looking down and to the left with a somber expression, resting his right hand on his forehead. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with more stone steps.

1 in 5 children will experience the death of someone close to them by age 18. (*Kenneth Doka, Editor of OMEGA, Journal for Death and Dying*)

Supporting Your Child



## Healthy Grieving for Children

Healthy grieving is extremely important for adolescents, but they often do not receive the support they need.

If they are told to “be strong” and “take care of the family,” they miss out on the opportunity to grieve, leading to harmful consequences later on. Many parents are too overwhelmed by their own grief to be able to help their child. Parents often do not talk to their children about the loss they have experienced. Either because it causes them pain, or to try to spare their child pain. In reality, children suffer more from feelings of isolation than from the loss itself. **They may also feel that no one else is grieving, leaving them angry and without validation of normal feelings of grief.**

To support healthy grieving, parents should give their child or teen permission to grieve by talking about the loss themselves; sharing their own personal feelings to normalize the feelings of their son or daughter; and confirming that it is okay to feel sad and all of the other emotions that go along with grieving.

Friends, family members, adult mentors, and teachers sometimes struggle with knowing how to help. School counselors typically give their grieving students needed support early on, but it can be more difficult as time goes on.

## Warning Signs of Unhealthy Grieving in Adolescents and Teens:

- ❑ changing eating and sleeping patterns
- ❑ disinterest or decline in academic performance
- ❑ change in peer or family relationships
- ❑ increase in risk-taking behaviors (including alcohol or drugs, sex, tattoos)
- ❑ denial of pain; appearance of being overly strong

## Some Healthy Ways for Children and Teens to Grieve:

- ❑ Make a photo collage of the person; using it to tell stories with others who cared for him or her.
- ❑ Light a special candle for the day on birthdays, holidays, etc.
- ❑ Use rituals of their faith community to acknowledge grief.
- ❑ Plan a fun family day in memory of the loved one on his or her birthday.
- ❑ Volunteer at local hospice or other agency, or hospital to help other families.

## Five Key Needs of Grieving Children and Teens:

1. information and education
2. opportunities to express feelings
3. communication
4. opportunities to remember
5. opportunities to meet with grieving peers

## Tips for What to Say:

- "I'm sorry that your mother (or other) died."
- "I'm here for you."
- "How can I help?"
- "It's okay to feel angry/guilty/sad/etc."
- "It is also okay to laugh and be happy, even when you are sad."
- "It's okay to feel overwhelmed. We're not taught how to grieve."
- "There are good supports to help you."
- "Just because you feel crazy doesn't mean you are."

## Tips for What NOT to Say:

- "I know how you feel."
- "Time heals all wounds."
- "God needed him or her in heaven;"  
"God has a plan," "God never gives you more than you can handle."
- "Try not to worry about it. Focus on your school work."
- "Grief ends at six months/one year . . ."
- "You should be over it by now."



# Helping Your Child Through Grief

Grief is an extremely difficult and engaging process. One must focus on him or herself during this period, and rightly so. Many times, however, we overlook the fact that grief reactions come in a variety of ways. Therefore, children are often ignored during mourning, with the rationale that “they wouldn’t understand.” Children become forgotten grievers. The grieving process in children is highly complex, since much depends upon each child’s stage of development. For instance, a three-year-old’s understanding of death and the mourning process will be quite different from that of a 10-year-old. Both of them would be different from a 16-year-old. Yet, there are many fundamental similarities between a child’s grief, teen’s grief, and the adult mourning process.

## Other Resources

[www.hospicenet.org](http://www.hospicenet.org)

[www.griefhealing.com](http://www.griefhealing.com)

[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

[www.beyondindigo.com](http://www.beyondindigo.com)

**The Invisible String** by Patrice Karst (younger children)

**Close Enough to Touch** by Richard Peck (about a boy whose girlfriend dies)

**Teenagers Face to Face with Bereavement** by Gravelle & Haskins (17 young adults discuss the deaths of their parents, siblings, and friends)

**Motherless Daughters** by Hope Edelman (older teens)

**Grief Camp:** Camp Conquer is a 3-day camp offered in the spring each year and is free of charge. [www.campconquer.com](http://www.campconquer.com)

## The following are suggestions to help your child through the grief process:

- Set time aside to talk with your child— explain the events occurring, why you are crying, etc.
- Use basic words like “die” and “dead” to convey the message.
- Use the deceased person’s name when referring to him or her.
- Avoid phrases that soften the blow: such as “sleeping,” “went away,” “God took them.” Such statements will only confuse and scare a child.
- Let your child ask questions— answer truthfully. Be honest, simple, and direct. If you do not understand something, let your child know that, too.
- Be sensitive to the age of your child and his or her level of understanding— do not offer information beyond the child’s level.
- Read or have your child read age-appropriate books related to death (many are available).



**FRISCO**  
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Student Services-Guidance and Counseling  
469-633-6583  
[www.friscoisd.org](http://www.friscoisd.org)

*Adapted from*

- [www.acs-teens.org/resources/parent\\_tips/adolescent\\_grief.php](http://www.acs-teens.org/resources/parent_tips/adolescent_grief.php)
- [www.bereavedfamilies.ca](http://www.bereavedfamilies.ca)
- [www.griefworksbc.com](http://www.griefworksbc.com)