

Movement Activities for Grieving Children

Physical outlets for connecting with feelings and processing grief



Why movement activities can be helpful

When it comes to grief, it can be hard for children — and adults — to understand what they are feeling and to find the words to express or process those emotions. While some children will process verbally, others will be drawn to art, music, or physical activity. Movement and play can help children identify and safely express their feelings.

These movement activities are a way for children to access this kind of non-verbal expression. They are also great to use when the feelings children have are especially big or intense. These activities work well with other types of big energy play like running outside, sports, and messy creative projects.

Restorative body poses to support grief

Strong emotions connected to grief, such as anger and sadness, may be difficult to process. These emotions can create stress in the body, resulting in tight shoulders, achy low backs, or even headaches. Sometimes these emotions leave children and adults feeling sluggish and tired. No matter what mood you're experiencing, you can move your body into these shapes to learn more about these emotions and ways to process them.

Heart Openers

These poses are ideal for times when you feel awake and have some energy, including energy that feels tense from worry or anxiety. These poses allow your body to open up to the environment around you. Alternatively, these poses can be done when you are feeling slow and want to move your body to feel more energized.



Child's Pose: Sit back between your heels and bring your knees wide. Bring your toes to touch and forehead to the ground. Allow your belly to relax.

Bug Pose (Happy Baby): On your back, bring your legs up to your chest and grab your feet, rock side to side to massage your low back.



Twist: On your back, bring your knees over to one side of your body and stretch along your spine. Switch sides

Bridge (Hip Lift): On your back with your knees bent and feet on the ground, lift your hips up slowly.



Cobra: On your belly, bring your arms by your sides and palms flat on the ground, press into your palms and lift your chest.



Pretzel (Eagle): Standing on one leg, wrap the other leg around the standing leg and wrap the arms around each other. Then switch legs and arms.



The Dougy Center

The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

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Created in partnership with Occupational Therapy Students from Pacific University, Laura Cerny & Alana Davison

End lying on your back, with arms and legs out wide, eyes closed.

Heart Closers

These poses are ideal for times when you feel heavy, slow, and low energy. These poses can bring a sense of comfort and ease to your body and mind. Alternatively, these poses can be done when you feel tense, worried, or anxious and want to move your body to slow down and feel more settled.



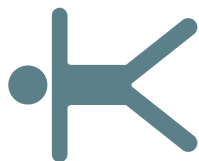
Child's Pose: Sit back between your heels and bring your knees wide. Bring your toes to touch and forehead to the ground. Allow your belly to relax.

Criss Cross Legs: Sit with your legs criss crossed and fold forward over them with your arms outstretched.



Seated Forward Fold: With your legs straight in front of you (bend knees as needed), fold your chest over your legs and reach your arms forward.

Gorilla: From standing, fall forward over your legs and place your palms underneath the balls of your feet.



End with lying on your back, with arms and legs out wide, eyes closed.

Accessibility Accommodations:

All of these poses can be adapted to be done in a chair, wheelchair, or lying down depending on accessibility needs. Having some blankets, pillows, and cushions available for support and comfort can be helpful too.

Freeze Dance with Emotions

Moving your body to music is one way to express emotions related to grief. These movements can look like anything, including following the rhythm, dancing, facial expressions, big or small movements, jumping, swaying, or singing along. Dancing can be done standing, seated, or even lying down, which makes it accessible to anyone who wants to move to the music.

Directions:

While a song is playing, call out a feeling and invite kids to dance and move in ways that mirror how they relate to that emotion.

Emotions can include: happy, sad, scared, anxious, angry, embarrassed, lonely, shy, silly, overwhelmed, excited, worried, disappointed, relieved, hopeful, and any others that comes to mind.

After a few moments, stop the music and everyone freezes in a position. This quick pause provides a moment to acknowledge that it's okay to feel your feelings, sit with them, and that there are no right/wrong or good/bad emotions.

This activity can be done at home as a family or at The Dougy Center in a group. At home you can personalize it by picking music that is connected in some way to the person who died.

Accessibility Accommodations:

Hold up cards with the emotions written on them and a picture of someone feeling that emotion. This could be an adaptation for children who experience hearing impairment, and/or a child who would benefit from having a visual cue of what the emotion can look like. Depending on the volume level of the music and/or environment, having earplugs or earmuffs available can support children with a variety of sensory needs. Similarly, if you do this activity outside, consider having sunglasses available.

Provide physical outlets/safe ways to express big feelings

Every child experiences grief differently and may need to express strong emotions like anger, frustration, anxiety, confusion, joy, and sadness. As a parent, caregiver, or group facilitator, it can be hard to figure out how to best support a child in these emotions. In addition to providing extra nurturance to help children feel safe and secure, here are some options for safely expressing these big feelings. While we have a variety of rooms at The Dougy Center for children to process these emotions, at home you can create a “Big Feelings” area for children to do the activities suggested below. These activities help children learn it’s okay to feel what they’re feeling and there are healthy and safe ways to express those emotions.

Activity Options:

- Howl at the moon
- Shake their body to music
- Throw wet sponges or a squeaky toy at an outside wall or floor
- Jump on a trampoline
- Throw soft things like stuffed animals, pillows, or bean bags — just not at another person!
- Stomp their feet on the ground or on bubble wrap
- Rip up newspaper
- Stretch their body

Accessibility Accommodations:

Many of these activities can be done seated or standing. Consider using egg cartons instead of bubble wrap, and have gloves and sunglasses available for sensory sensitive children.



Move, Think, Share

In addition to physical activity, talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. This activity is a way to do both. Children move their bodies around an open space onto traits and interests (see example list) that may be true of the person in their life who died. Then, children have the opportunity to share a story or memory about their person. You can do this activity indoors or outdoors, just make sure the space is large enough for children to move around!

Set Up:

If setting up indoors, use pieces of paper with traits/interests on them in written words and pictures. Spread the pieces of paper around the room. If setting up outdoors, you can use chalk to write out traits/interests, or use the same papers that can be used indoors. For both settings, leave a couple of blank pages, or empty chalk circles in case children want to come up with a different trait/interest not provided.



To Play:

Introduce children to the different words and pictures. Let them know they'll be moving around, and it's okay if they end up on the same spot as another person. Use a sound or visual like a bell, timer, special clap, or body movement to signal when children should move from spot to spot. Invite children to choose how they want to move. Examples include, running, hopping, jumping, skipping, leaping, taking big/small steps, tip toeing, or crawling. Once they pick a spot, ask them to think about a time when they remember the person who died being like that trait, or doing that interest. If they want to, children can share with anyone else on the same spot, or with the whole group.

Examples of Traits/Interests:

- playful
- likes reading
- cool
- talented
- grumpy
- serious
- loving
- musical
- video games
- smart
- funny
- best hugger
- brave
- curious
- silly
- likes cooking
- good bike rider
- great smile
- eating

Provide a demonstration before starting to help children get familiar with the activity. Moving in between the spaces can happen in whatever way works best — big movements, small movements, rolling in a wheelchair, etc. You can also provide an additional set of trait/interest cards to anyone who wants to remain seated. They can participate

by holding up or pointing to a card. If you're doing this activity outside, consider providing sunglasses for those with sensory sensitivities.

Sample Script:

"We are going to be moving our bodies to different spots around this space. The different spots describe a trait or interest, which means something about someone or something they like to do, like a hobby. Can anyone see one that describes your person who died?"

You're going to move to a spot when you see/hear the special signal, which for today is ____ (could be a bell, special clap, holding up a special item). There's also a blank spot if you don't find one that's true for your person. It's okay to have more than one person on a spot at a time.

Once you get to your spot, think about a time when you remember your person acting that way or doing that interest or hobby.

Since a lot of us are going to be moving around this space, what are some ways we can be safe with our bodies? Ex: Watch where you are going so you don't bump into another person, let someone know they are welcome to share the spot you are on.

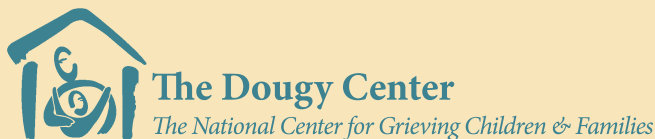
It looks like everyone is at a spot. Take some time and think about when you remember the person in your life who died doing that activity or acting that way. Does anyone want to share with the group? If someone is sharing the spot with you, you can share with each other, or if there is anyone on a spot near you, you can share with each other."

Alternative prompts for the facilitator to call out/show to the group before they move:

"Move to a spot that is something that you and the person in your life who died had in common. Ex: both liked to ride bikes, both are goofy."

"Move to a spot that is not like the person in your life that died."

"Move to a spot with something that is true for you!"



Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences. Our *Pathways* program provides support for families living with an advanced serious illness.

The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 45,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or tdcbookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.