



WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

No matter how familiar you are with grief, it's still hard to know what to say when a death occurs. It's human nature to fall back on the clichés and platitudes we've grown up hearing. If you've ever found yourself relying on automatic responses, you're not alone. Most of the time these sentiments come from good intentions and a desire to comfort. That said, here are some common ones that often miss the mark with grieving children and families, along with suggestions for what to say instead.

"You must be..."

Assuming how someone is feeling can be affirming (if you assume correctly), but more often it sets an expectation for their reactions that may or may not be true. If someone doesn't feel the way you think they do, they might experience guilt or shame for not grieving the right way.

Better options:

How is your grief today?

How is it affecting you lately?

"At least..."

As Brené Brown illustrates in her famous [video](#) about sympathy vs. empathy, any sentence that starts with "At least" is likely not empathy. Examples include: "At least you have other children." "At least you can get remarried." "At least you were young, you probably don't remember much about your mom." These statements minimize the grieving person's experience and push them to focus on the positive.

Better options:

I appreciate all that you share with me.

What has this been like for you?

What have you noticed about being a widow at 30?

"It's all part of a bigger plan."

Any attempt to put meaning on someone else's experience assumes everyone shares the same world view. Instead, invite those who are grieving to talk about what they think and feel.

Better options:

I'm here to listen.

What's your sense about what happened?

"I know how you feel."

Grief is extremely individual. Even people in the same family, who shared the same relationship with the person who died, may think and feel differently. While you might want to let them know you get it, doing so puts the focus on you and can close the door on the grieving person's unique experience and connection with the person who died.

Better options:

What has it been like for you?

My dad died too, but I know grief is so different for everyone. How was Father's Day for you?

"You're so strong."

This assumes you know how the person is doing, without knowing what's happening beneath the surface. It also leaves little room for grief to be messy and look like the complete opposite of strong.

Better options:

I appreciated you emailing us with what happened. It was so helpful to know the story. How was it for you to do that?

You said you went back to work/school, how's that been?

It seems like a lot of people in your family turn to you for help. Who do you go to when you need support?

“Don't feel that way.”

If a grieving child or adult is talking about an emotion that is particularly painful to hear, the instinct can be to take it away in the hopes of making them feel better. Resist the urge! Trying to wash away someone's difficult emotions can give the message they are wrong or bad for feeling how they feel. By avoiding, “Don't feel that way,” you communicate that you are a safe person to talk with and can handle listening to how they are feeling.

Better options:

You're really struggling with feeling guilty.

Seems like you have a lot of regrets about the last few days with your dad. I'm here if you want to share more.

“They would want you to be happy/They would be so proud of you.”

Depending on your relationship with the person who died, you might have some sense of how they would respond to a situation, but it's best to leave those conclusions to the person you're trying to support.

Better options:

I'm so proud of you for graduating high school. What do you think your dad would say if he were here?

Sounds like you're struggling with how to feel about getting married without your brother there. It can be so tough to plan something celebratory when you're grieving.

“Let me know if there's anything I can do.”

Offering to help in this way puts the responsibility on the grieving person to identify what they need and reach out to ask. Instead, make specific, tangible offers of support. It's hard for pretty much everyone to accept help, so reassure them it's okay to turn down your offer. Keep checking in as support tends to disappear after the first few weeks.

Better options:

I'm on my way to the grocery store, can I pick something up for you? You said your kids love juice boxes in their lunches, I can grab a few packs.

You mentioned you're having trouble sleeping. I keep my phone on all night, so if it's 2 a.m. and talking would help, I'm happy to pick up.

This list is a just a start. Since grief is different for everyone, a good motto to fall back on is: *Ask, don't assume*. Remember too that intention matters. Aim for creating space for someone to talk about their experience rather than trying to fix, change, or take away their pain.

**The Dougy Center**

The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

Our Mission

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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.



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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

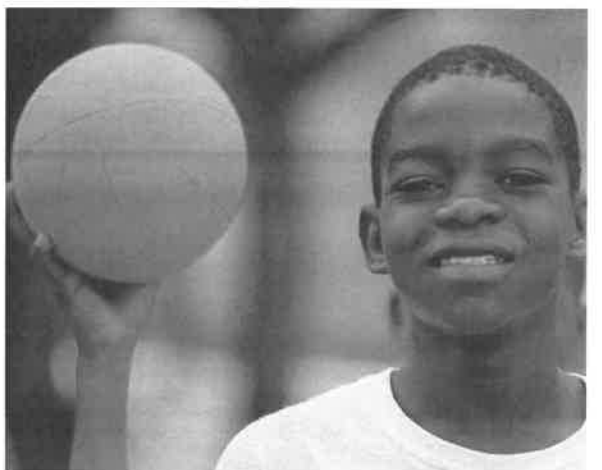
Every child experiences grief differently and may need to express strong emotions like anger, frustration, anxiety, confusion, joy, and sadness. As a parent, caregiver, or group facilitator, it can be hard to figure out how to best support a child in these emotions. In addition to providing extra nurturance 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!"



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ALTERNATIVES TO “I’M SORRY”

What do you say when you find out someone died? What words do you write in a sympathy card or email? It’s a universal struggle to know what to say in an inherently emotional and potentially uncomfortable situation.

Friends, teachers, and colleagues often don’t know what to say or how to react when they hear that someone’s parent, sibling, friend, or other family member died. This can lead many people, including children and teens, to avoid any topic that connects to their loss. Grieving people brace for the automatic, “I’m sorry,” that often follows when they share that someone in their life died.

When asked why “I’m sorry” doesn’t work well, children and teens had this to say:

“How am I supposed to respond? It’s okay? I mean, really, it’s not okay.”

“Um, it’s not their fault, why are they apologizing?”

“It’s just so awkward. It’s like a total conversation stopper.”

“So many people say it, even people I’ve never talked to before, it feels kind of fake.”

“I know they mean well, but it just gets old.”

Does this mean definitively that you should never say, “I’m sorry” to someone who is grieving? No, it’s just helpful to consider the relationship you have with the person and the context of the conversation when choosing what to say. Ask yourself the question, “Is what I’m about to say going to connect or disconnect

the conversation?” Sometimes “I’m sorry” can act as an interruption. This may happen when a person shares about a death as part of a bigger story. When “I’m sorry” is interjected, it can stop the flow of conversation, and leave the teller with the awkward task of saying something like, “It’s okay, it was a long time ago.”

On the other hand, if a friend calls to tell you that someone died, that’s a time when an authentic, heartfelt, “I’m sorry” can serve as a connection. Even in that situation though, keep in mind that the person on the other end of the line has likely heard those words many times over, so it can be good to try and think of something different to say. A few possibilities include: “I’m so sad to hear this,” “I’m so sorry you have to go through this,” and “How heartbreaking.” Another option is just to repeat back what the person tells you, “Your dad died last night.” This gives them the opportunity to say more and direct the conversation.

WHAT TO SAY
INSTEAD OF
“I’M SORRY”

When it comes to children and teens, one of the only alternatives they've offered is, "That totally sucks." Of course, if that's language you're not comfortable with, you might come up with something else that acknowledges the reality of the loss without verging into what the teens call, "sympathy overload." Many teens appreciate when people can remain matter of fact while talking about the death.

In the end, there are no perfect words to say. Just keep in mind that grieving people are navigating conversations, big and small, throughout the day that have the potential to highlight their loss. Conveying a sense of calm and ease when someone does tell you about a death goes a long way to dismantle the awkwardness and discomfort they are used to

encountering.

From that foundation, you can choose which words to say, based on your connection with that person and the context of the conversation. Try writing down a few alternative phrases that work for you. This will make it easier to access them the next time you want to communicate that you care to someone who is grieving.



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The first thing I
thought when I
heard...



A series of 15 horizontal lines for writing.



What Not to Say

Take-Home Message

Many school professionals worry they may say the wrong thing to grieving students and make matters worse. Understanding what not to say will help you be more confident and effective when you reach out to students. The suggestions can help you support grieving children.

How to Act

Here are some behaviors that will increase children’s comfort, sense of safety, and ability to express themselves.

- Be present and authentic. Keep the focus on the student. Offer supportive statements that honestly reflect both your relationship with the deceased and your sense of the student’s response.
- Listen more, talk less. Keep your own comments brief. Ask open-ended questions to help students discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- Avoid trying to “cheer up” students or their families. Grief is painful. Attempts to cheer people up or bring focus to the good things in their lives are likely to communicate that you don’t want to hear students or their families talk about their pain.
- Accept expressions of emotion. Expressions of sadness, anger, selfishness, or confusion are common in grieving children. These are an important part of the process. When children hear they should “toughen up” or “be strong for their families” they are less likely to fully express their feelings of grief.
- Show empathy. Reflect back what you hear students say and the actions you observe. Use compassion. Avoid judgment.
- Step in to stop harmful actions when safety is a concern.



It’s important to let children express their feelings of grief. Sometimes these can be quite dramatic—shouting, crying, kicking the floor. It’s also appropriate to stop behaviors that may be harmful to the children, to others or to property.

What Not to Say

Many common and well-intentioned statements are not helpful to grieving children and their families. Here are some comments to avoid, and suggestions for what to say instead.

Don’t worry if you’ve used these statements in the past. Children are very forgiving as long as they feel valued and supported. They hear our concern more than our exact words.

Don’t Say This	Say This Instead
“I know just what you’re going through.” You cannot know this. Everyone’s experience of grief is unique.	“Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?”
“You must be incredibly angry.” It is not helpful to tell people how they are feeling or ought to feel. It is better to ask. People in grief often feel many different things at different times.	“Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?”
“This is hard. But it’s important to remember the good things in life, too.” This kind of statement is likely to quiet down true expressions of grief. When people are grieving, it’s important they be allowed to experience and express whatever feelings, memories, or wishes they’re having.	“What kinds of memories do you have about the person who died?”
“At least he’s no longer in pain.” Efforts to “focus on the good things” are more likely to minimize the student or family’s experience (see above). Any statement that begins with the words “at least” should probably be reconsidered.	“What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your loved one died?”

(Continued)



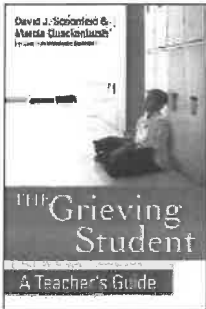
What Not to Say

<p>“I lost both my parents when I was your age.” Avoid comparing your losses with those of students or their families. These types of statements may leave children feeling that their loss is not as profound or important.</p>	<p>“Tell me more about what this has been like for you.”</p>
<p>“You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.” Grieving children are often told they shouldn’t express their feelings. This holds children back from expressing their grief and learning to cope with these difficult feelings.</p>	<p>“How is your family doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?”</p>
<p>“My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling.” It is not useful to compare losses. Keep the focus on grieving children and their families.</p>	<p>“I know how I’ve felt when someone I loved died, but I don’t really know how you’re feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?”</p>

Expect a Range of Responses

The most important thing you can do is simply be with students while they are grieving. Witness their distress. Listen to what they have to say. Tolerate silence when they’re not ready to speak.

Suspend judgment about how students “should” cope with their situations and stay open to the wide range of responses children may have. Let them experience their grief in their own way. Let them know you will be there with them. While it’s important to intervene when you think children may hurt themselves or others, most of the time children are able to express intense feelings without danger.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher’s Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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