

Common Questions About Children and Grief

The death of an important person in a child's life can be overwhelming and scary. Caring adults such as parents, teachers, and neighbors, often have questions about how to support grieving children. Judi's House in Denver provides support to children and families grieving a death. Services are provided in Spanish and English, to youth ages 3 to 25, and their caregivers. All services are free of charge. Judi's House focuses on strengths to promote healing and prevent future difficulties. The following are answers to common questions about supporting grieving children.

At what age do children understand death?

Understanding death varies for children at different developmental levels. While children under the age of two may not understand death, they have a sense of absence when an important person is gone. As children develop more language, they begin to have questions about what death is and why people die. Adults can help them to understand the physical reality of death by talking about death and answering questions honestly. Judi's House provides [resources for adults about developmental differences in understanding death and how to help](#).

Should I talk with children about death?

Yes. Children look to trusted adults to understand what is okay to talk about and express. By modeling talking about death, you let them know it is okay to express your thoughts and feelings, even if it is hard. If you are not the primary caregiver, consult with the child's parent or guardian about the messages they are communicating.

How do I talk to children about death?

Explaining death to a child can be confusing and difficult. For children, trying to understand death can feel like a jigsaw puzzle. For adults, it is hard to find the words to explain what happened in terms that children can understand. At Judi's House, we know it is important to use concrete language when answering the questions of how and why a person died. It helps to deliver these messages in small bits, knowing that children will ask you further questions when they need more pieces to complete the puzzle. Consider having discussions about loss while children are drawing or playing to allow for multiple types of expression. Remember to be open and honest while following their

lead. It is okay to say, "I don't know." Judi's House offers suggestions for [talking to children about death](#).

How should I handle a child's grief reactions?

Grieving children demonstrate a wide range of reactions. Sadness, anger, fatigue, absent-mindedness, isolation, and anxiety are just a few natural grief reactions. While some children may not seem impacted at all, others may have very strong emotions and behaviors. Your first instinct may be to try to "fix it" or make things better. While this may help in the short term, children may get the message their feelings are wrong or not okay. They may begin to suppress or stuff their grief. Judi's House recommends supporting a child's grief expression by listening, normalizing, and modeling grieving. We also offer lists of [common grief reactions](#). It is helpful to provide as much stability and consistency as possible, including continuing to enforce rules and expectations. Allowing children to express their feelings is often the best way to help them feel better.

What if I feel sad or cry?

There are a number of reasons you may be experiencing emotional reactions. You may be grieving too, whether it is the same loss as the child or a separate loss you have experienced. Seeing a child hurting can bring up feelings of discomfort or sadness. These responses are natural, normal reactions to grief. It is okay to be honest about your feelings of sadness, angry, or discomfort. In this way you are modeling grieving and showing empathy and compassion. You also have an opportunity to teach healthy ways to cope with difficult emotions.

Should children go to funerals/memorial services?

For many, funerals, memorials, or life celebrations are important rituals in the grieving process that provide a chance to say goodbye and an opportunity to mark the significance of the deceased's life. Deciding if children should attend funerals is different for every family. It's helpful to solicit children's opinions about attending and involve them in discussions about the service, including what will happen leading up to, during, and following the ceremony. It may be helpful to visit the location of the service and describe who will be there, how they will dress, and what the children will see (e.g., a casket, an urn, photos of the deceased, outpouring of strong emotions). Children may have many questions that should be answered openly and honestly. If children do attend, identify a close friend or neighbor as the go to supportive adult for the children if they need a break or to go outside. Afterwards, make time to talk about the service and make sure they know they can come to you with any questions or thoughts. If children

do not attend, it may be helpful to find alternative ways to memorialize and say goodbye to the deceased.

For more information about Judi's House please visit our website at www.judishouse.org If your family would benefit from grief support services, please call 720-941-0331.

©2023 Judi's House JAG Institute