

Supporting Children and Teens through Grief

Unity Hospice is committed to offering you information and guidance to help you anticipate and understand the changing needs of children and teens as they anticipate a death or to support them after a death has occurred. They will grieve in ways that reflect their individual personality, developmental understanding, previous experience with loss, and the support and information available to them.



After the death of a family member or friend, children and teens need to know what to expect and how to deal with any thoughts and feelings that may surface. It is important for you to be as open as possible with all emotions and questions that arise.

As an adult, you may be faced with the challenge of coping with your own grief at the same time children need support with theirs.

There may be times when you find it hard to listen to their anger or sadness because it brings out your own emotions. Remember, children are learning how to grieve by watching you, which means it is okay for them to see you shed some tears or express sadness and other emotions in a controlled way.

Within families, everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time. This can present challenges and may require extra patience, understanding and compromise.

Just like adults, children and teens have a "grieving style", which may lean towards a task-oriented or an emotion-oriented approach.¹

Neither one is necessarily better than the other. Most people's grieving style is a combination of both.

- Those who are more task-oriented may need to return to old routines or may focus on activities, such as artwork, play or sports. They may benefit from opportunities to remember the person who has died in concrete ways, such as creating a memory book or special object.
- Those who are more emotion-oriented tend to talk more about their feelings. Feelings such as sorrow, anger or fear can sometimes explode in loud outbursts. It is important to have opportunities for children to share these feelings and to receive comfort and support from you. If you feel unable to provide this, look for another adult who may be able to do so. This could be a family member, friend, volunteer or counselor.

Suggested Books for Adults Who are Supporting Grieving Children and Teens

Companioning the Grieving Child by Alan Wolfelt:

Dr. Wolfelt redefines the role of the grief counselor in this compassionate, child-centered guide. In lieu of the traditional medical model, Dr. Wolfelt encourages counselors and other caregivers to aspire to a “companioning” philosophy, in which the child is the real expert of his or her grief. Based on Dr. Wolfelt’s well-known beliefs of companioning, this resource helps caregivers, family members, teachers, and others support grieving children so they can live well, love well, and mourn well.

Finding the Words by Alan Wolfelt: Helpful adult resource for pre-death verbiage on talking with children about death and all that comes with it. This text is broken down into age groups to assist people with using age-appropriate language with children about death and dying.

How Do We Tell the Children? A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children Two to Teen Cope When Someone Dies by Dan Schaefer and Christine Lyons: Helpful book for parents and professionals about communication with children of various ages on the topic of death and dying.

Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One – A Guide for Grownups by William Kroen:

This book is helpful for parents and professionals and was winner of the 1996 Parents’ Award for Excellence. The advice and information covers what a child may experience from infancy through age eighteen.

The Grieving Child – A Parent’s Guide by Helen Fitzgerald: An easy-to-read book for parents looking for tips and recommendations about ways to support grieving children at any age.

Healing Children’s Grief – Surviving a Parent’s Death from Cancer by Grace Hyslop Christ:

This book is based on research with 88 families over the course of a parent’s terminal cancer diagnosis, death and grief. An excellent resource on the ages, developmental strengths and needs of children as they face the death of a parent.

When Someone Dies: A Child-Caregiver Activity Book by The National Alliance for Grieving Children:

An activity book for children that also provides valuable information to parents and caregivers about how grief impacts children. Contained within the pages of the book are activities for children designed to help them better express, understand, and cope with their grief. Each page also offers guidance about how adults can connect with their child on the very difficult subjects of death, dying, and grief.

For questions or to speak with a member of the Unity team, please call.

For additional resources and information on Unity’s grief support programming for children and adults, please visit Unity’s website.



Strength
at Your Side

800.990.9249 • www.unityhospice.org

¹ Adapted from Terry L. Martin & Kenneth J. Doka. *Men Don't Cry...Women Do – Transcending Gender Stereotypes of Grief*.