

Supporting Young Children Through Grief

CHILDREN AGES 3 TO 5



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Developmental Information

At this age children think in magical, self-centered, physical and connected ways. Children at this age see themselves as the center of most things they experience. They believe their thoughts and behaviors are the cause of events, and things that happen at or close to the same time are related. For example, if in a fit of anger, the child wished you dead and then you became sick, they may believe they "caused" your illness to happen. Unfortunately, when a child this age gets such an idea, it can be very difficult for them to revise their thinking. If you sense this has happened, help the child to understand that nothing they said, did or felt caused the illness or death. Often it is necessary to reassure the child more than once they are not to blame for what has happened.

In terms of how children aged 3 to 5 feel, there are two things to remember: they are anxious when separated from parents or primary caregivers and they are distressed by expressions of powerful emotion from adults.

Children may feel scared and responsible when they see a parent or other significant adult in distress (e.g., prolonged tears, loud sobbing or slamming of doors). For example, you might be driving with the child and unexpectedly be overcome with rage and sadness you feel about your father's sudden death. These strong feelings might affect your interactions with the child and you might find yourself crying and yelling at them about something minor. If this happens, it is important the child see you recover from these emotions and that you carefully and calmly explain to them what you were feeling and why.

Children of this age tend to have little contact with systems outside the family.

Relatives, daycare or preschool staff are often the child's only contact with the world outside the family. When someone in the family is ill, this often means the child will visit a number of new places (hospitals) and meet new people such as doctors and nurses. You might want to use books, toys or pictures to help the child become familiar



with these new situations. It may be helpful to inform daycare or preschool staff of the situation as well.

When Someone is Very Ill

Tell the child about changes in the person who is ill and reassure that those changes are caused by the disease and its treatments. Children of this age benefit from clear, simple, honest information, given on a regular basis, to help them understand what they are seeing and hearing as the ill person's health changes. For example, on your next visit to the hospital, you might show them a wheelchair or an electric bed and demonstrate when and how they are used. When you talk about the sick person or the illness with the child, focus on the things that will be seen (e.g., medicines, weight loss, hair loss, equipment) and heard (e.g., breathing changes, crying, common words, such as chemo or cancer).

Respect that your child cannot witness intense feelings for more than a brief time.

It is common for adults to want to protect children from intense displays of emotion. However, sometimes this expectation is unrealistic. For example, you may need to tell a child that his/her mom is going to die, but you can't even think about it without being overcome with tears. If this is your situation, you might ask a trusted adult to help with this conversation. Talk ahead of time so this person understands your needs and exactly what you want the child to know.

Talk with the person who is ill about the length and frequency of visits with the child. Sometimes the excitement and energy of a young child may be tiring or overwhelming. Plan for the child to have something interesting to do during the visit. It is a good idea to take quiet toys or other simple activities they can play with or show to the person you're visiting. For example, the child might draw pictures or make a card for the person while you're there. Don't visit during regular nap times. Often a visit over lunch or dinner is a comfortable way to spend time together. Be prepared to leave when the





child shows you, through their mood or behavior, that they are ready to go. If you would like to stay longer than the child can manage, arrange to have a favorite person come and take them home.

Make time for the child to ask questions and share feelings about what's happening. When someone you love is seriously ill, it can be difficult to find time to talk about it with the child. Many adults hope that if the child isn't showing any signs or behaviors of being upset, they're okay. However, even though children of this age are very aware of what is going on with people that are important to them, they often do not have the words needed to let adults know their feelings and questions. You will need to make time for these conversations. You might find that bedtime is a good time to check out how they are doing or you might choose mealtimes or car rides for these talks.

When Someone has Died

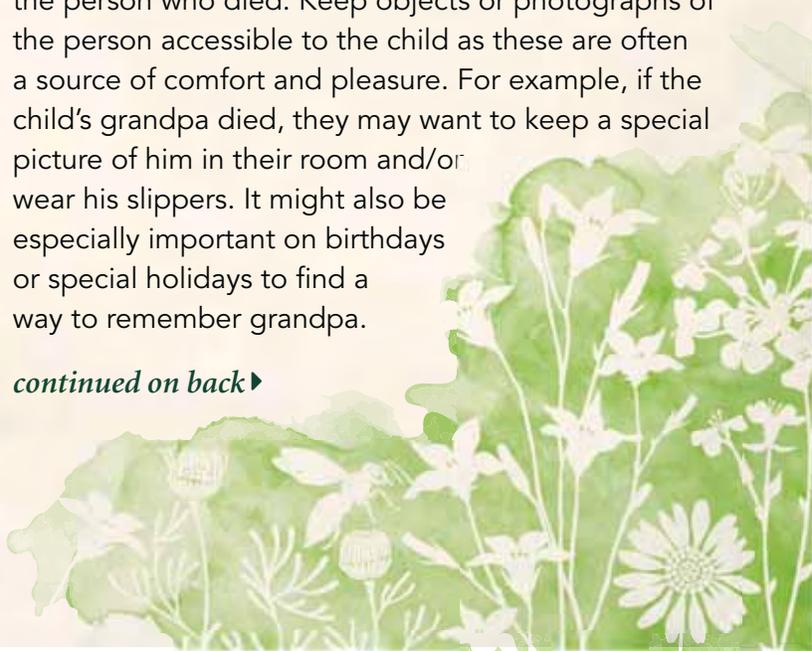
Use simple, but specific details to explain to the child the person has died. Use words such as "dead" and "died." It is helpful to clarify that when someone dies their heart doesn't beat, their ears don't hear, their body doesn't move, etc., and the person cannot feel anything anymore. The characters and heroes of cartoons and movies aimed at children of this age often magically come back to life and this, unfortunately, reinforces their false and magical beliefs about death. Consequently, it may be difficult for children to understand the permanence of death. You will likely need to explain and remind, frequently, that the person who died will not be coming back to life. It may be helpful to recall a past loss the child will remember, such as the death of a pet or another person, to demonstrate that dead people don't come back. If you are able to remain calm, you might allow the child to see the body after death because it may help them to understand in a very concrete way that when someone dies, their body stops working completely.

Prepare the child for any rituals that will take place after the death. Before attending the funeral or memorial service, explain to the child what will happen, who will be there, what they might see and what role, if any, they will have. Remember that children need concrete information and may find displays of intense emotion distressing. For example, if you and the child will be attending the funeral of a much loved uncle, you might tell them that many of their uncle's friends will be there and some people, including yourself, will probably be crying because they are sad that he died. If the coffin is open, you might explain that their uncle's body will be there so people can say goodbye to him and the coffin is used to bury the body in the ground. Ensure that you or another person will be available to take the child home if desired and be sure they know who that person will be. Encourage the child to ask questions.

Provide the child with frequent opportunities to think and talk about the person who died. When there has been a death in the family, children will need to talk about what happened long after the death and initial grieving period. Children look to parents and caregivers for guidance about how to grieve and if you don't talk about the loss, it is unlikely the child will. If you both openly talk about the person who died, sharing memories and feelings, it will help the child to understand and accept the loss.

Give the child access to objects that maintain an ongoing sense of connection to the person who died. Children of this age will long for the person who died and want them to come back. Resist the impulse to put away all the pictures and other reminders of the person who died. Keep objects or photographs of the person accessible to the child as these are often a source of comfort and pleasure. For example, if the child's grandpa died, they may want to keep a special picture of him in their room and/or wear his slippers. It might also be especially important on birthdays or special holidays to find a way to remember grandpa.

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Find out what helps the child feel connected to the person who died.

A child's grieving process may differ radically from your own. Children of this age live in the moment. They don't realize the full extent of the loss and may be uncomfortable with long intense displays of emotion. They will grieve sporadically with intense brief bursts over many years. For example, the child may be inconsolable about their father's death one moment and happily playing the next. When this happens, accept that this is normal. There will likely be feelings and questions about this loss for many years to come.

Suggested Books for Children 3 – 5 Years of Age

The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr: This book explains many aspects of grief children might experience after a death. It outlines emotions, physical sensations, and social changes that can happen and also gives a sense of hopefulness and healing when discussing the happy memories and lessons learned following the death.

Life is Like the Wind by Shona Innes: By comparing life to the wind this book explains how sometimes life is present in a body, and sometimes it is gone. It attempts to answer questions about where a life goes after it leaves the body while also exploring emotions that might occur when someone dies.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen: Through the use of simple, concrete language and imagery this book helps children understand the cycle of life and death. Pictures and metaphors from nature are used to illustrate life, death, and dying.

The Memory Box: A Book About Grief by Joanna Rowland: This story outlines the perspective of a young child who has experienced a death of someone they love using the metaphor of losing a balloon. This book helps to address two questions that may come up for young children: "Will I forget about my loved one?" and "What do I do with my emotions?" This book comes with a guide for parents aimed to help discuss the death with their child.

Sad Isn't Bad by Michaelene Mundy: A great starting point for explaining to young children what they might expect after a death (both for themselves and the environment surrounding them). This book normalizes the feelings and experiences that some children may go through as they grieve, and can help educate children who have never had a significant loss before.

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.



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