

# Supporting Children Through Grief

CHILDREN AGES 6 TO 8



Strength  
at Your Side

## Developmental Information

**Between 6 and 8 years of age the way children think changes.** Some children at this age are able to understand cause and effect. However, many will think in the magical ways of younger children. When someone in the family has died, other family members experience feelings of tension, conflict, sadness and anger. Young children will naturally detect these feelings even if you think you are hiding them. When you don't explain to a child these normal feelings are about the loss, a child may think they are the reason for the family's distress. If this happens, it is important to talk to the child immediately about what you are feeling and why. At this age, drawings, short stories and play may be ways to help your child understand why the illness or death has occurred. Use simple honest language. Avoid terms that your child may not clearly understand, such as "terminally ill" or "passed on".

**Children of this age usually feel free to express their emotions.** Unlike younger children, 6 to 8 year olds may remain fixated on the illness or death of a family member and can be easily overwhelmed by their own emotions. The sadness, anger, anxiety or guilt they may feel about a family member's illness usually shows up as a change in their normal behavior. For example, you might notice that a generally confident child is now anxious and resistant, with tears and tummy aches, when you take them to school. If this happens, talk to the teacher, counselor and principal about helping the child to express their feelings and feel safe when you are not available. It is common for children at this age to feel resentful when you take time and energy away from them to care for an ill family member. Since this may be unavoidable, it is important for the child to have special time alone with you and that you regularly explain why you are leaving them.

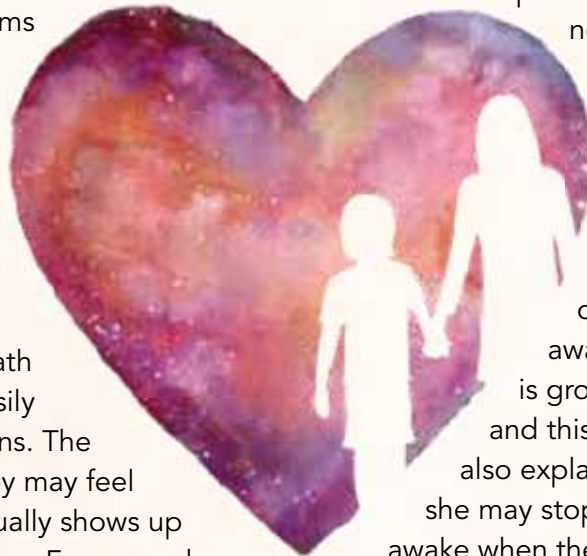
**Although children aged 6 to 8 have usually made connections with school and other children, they are not self-sufficient and still need reassurance from parents and other significant adults about their importance and safety in the world.** When parents or other significant adults are distracted by

caring for others or grieving, a child's basic needs for nurturing and encouragement can be overlooked. This may result in the child feeling rejected or frightened. During these times, the continuation of the child's usual routines and the company of other caring adults may be helpful.

## When Someone is Very Ill

**Tell the child about the disease, in words they understand, including its symptoms, treatment and what is likely to happen.** Talk about the things the child might see (e.g. weight loss, changes in the person's skin color, hair loss) or hear (e.g. coughing, confusion, people awake at night), and whether the person will get well or not. It will be necessary for you to go over this information again as things change and to be honest with the child about what the changes mean. For example, you might say to a child that their auntie has cancer and the doctors aren't able to make it go away. You could tell them the cancer is growing too big for her to get better and this means she will die. You might also explain to them that before she dies she may stop eating and be too tired to stay awake when they visit her. Since many children of this age will avoid asking questions out of fear of upsetting others or making the situation worse, it is important to start and continue these discussions throughout the illness.

**Demonstrate to the child that you love them and will be there for them.** At this age children look to their parents and other significant adults for their self-worth and safety. When you are not often free to play with the child and most of your times with them are affected by your own feelings related to a family member's terminal condition, the child may become insecure and resentful. These feelings may show up as withdrawn, angry or babyish behavior. For example, the child might stop speaking to you for a while or get into fights at school with their peers. If this happens, it will be important that you respond with love and understanding as well as giving and following through with reasonable consequences.





**Find one or two other caregivers who are trustworthy and can regularly take care of your child when you must be elsewhere.**

When you are looking for alternate caregivers, think about who the child feels happiest and most comfortable with. It is important these people are honest and open about the individual's illness in the same way you are. If the people you choose are uncomfortable discussing the illness with the child, you could provide them with information you have found particularly helpful. Also, if a counselor or other professional has been working with you and/or the child, he or she might meet with you and the other caregivers to suggest ways you might all work together to support the child through the grief process.

**Talk to teachers and other significant adults, such as coaches and group leaders.** These adults are part of the child's social world, and their care and understanding will help the child manage the awkward moments, impossible questions and intense emotions that may lie ahead. Let these people know there may be a temporary drop or change in the child's performance, enthusiasm or concentration. Let them know this kind of change is normal.

## When Someone has Died

**Tell the child promptly about the death.** If the child was not present at the time of death, tell them what has happened as soon as possible afterwards. Avoid using phrases such as "gone to a better place" or "with the angels" and comparisons that associate death with sleep. These common comparisons confuse the magical and concrete thinking of children this age. The child may misunderstand what you mean and become fearful. For example, instead of telling the child grandma has passed away, you would say she has died and you knew grandma died because she stopped breathing.



**Encourage and prepare the child to attend family rituals that will happen after the death.**

If there is to be a funeral or memorial service, begin to prepare the child for what to expect while attending. Be sure the child knows what will happen, who will be there, what role they may have at the service, and if the body of the person who died will be there. If you think the child may need support you may be unable to provide, ask a favorite person to be available. Whether the child attends the funeral or not, they might want to write a letter or make a drawing as a personal goodbye to the person who has died.

**Anticipate that the child may be concerned about their health and the health of other significant adults in their life.** After a death in the family, children often become quite curious and concerned about death. The child may frequently ask questions about whether different people in their life will die. Often this kind of fear shows up in the child's body. For example, there may be complaints of similar symptoms to the person who died, such as headaches or tummy aches. If the child complains in this way, provide your loving attention, patience and understanding. Provide reassurance, in simple ways, that you both are healthy and do not have the same illness as the person who died.

**Expect the child may become concerned about what would happen if their surviving parent(s) or guardian became ill and died.**

When a significant adult dies, the child will likely become more concerned that you may die. It is important you explain to the child what would happen if you were to become ill and die. For example, talking to them about who would care for them and what they would do for them can be reassuring.

**Understand it is normal for the child to express grief in brief bursts quickly followed by happier activities.** The child's grief may happen in sudden outbursts of sadness, anger, guilt or fear. When this happens, allow the child to express their feelings in reasonable or safe ways. For example,

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if they are showing a lot of anger, you and the child might play soccer or tag together. If they are sad, you might spend some time talking about the person who died or looking at photographs together. These moments may be especially difficult for you to get through because your own grief will be triggered. Be sure you are allowing yourself the time and space you need to grieve so you are able to support the child as they grieve.

**Ask for the support of key adults in the child's life, such as a teacher, school counselor, principal, coach or group leader.** Children this age are beginning to look to other adults as well as parents or guardians to provide them with a sense of well-being, self-esteem and security. Be sure these key people understand grief and are comfortable with it so they can help the child deal with the awkwardness and curiosity of other children and adults.

## Suggested Books for Children 6-8 Years Old

**The Fall of Freddie the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia:** This story chronicles the journey of a young leaf through his life as his questions about life and death are addressed by an older, wiser leaf. This story walks through the seasons of life and death and how we can address the challenges that go with them.

**The Invisible String by Patrice Karst:** An illustration of the invisible connections between our hearts and those of our loved ones. This book talks about how our bonds with the people connected to our heart are always present even when someone cannot physically be with us.

**The Most Special Bear by Bonita Mason:** Designed to help children process the grief they may be experiencing after the death of a significant person, this book also includes specific questions (created by a psychologist) to help children explore their emotions.

**The Next Place by Warren Hanson:** This book discusses the journey after death of a person who is leaving behind their life and their old self to join the community of their family and friends who have died before them.

**When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown:** This book offers a thorough depiction of death and the many forms it takes, as well as the emotions that may accompany grieving people. It attempts to answer many questions children may ask before or after a death has occurred.

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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