

Supporting Children Through Grief

CHILDREN AGES 9 TO 11



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Developmental Information

Children aged 9 to 11 are becoming more capable of concrete operational thinking. This means children this age want to gain knowledge and understand events. They have many questions (often “why” questions) and have a need for detailed information about terminal illness and death. They use logic in their thinking and are sometimes able to modify inaccurate conclusions they have previously formed. For example, a child may start out by wishing a dead person would “come back to life” (which is like a younger child’s more “magical” thinking); but as things are explained, they may be able to change this thinking and understand that coming back to life is not possible.

Although children this age definitely have feelings about a person being ill, they don’t easily talk about these feelings or express them to others. Children this age are now beginning to rely on their new ability for logic and are starting to think through their feelings as well as feel them. For example, if the child has been told someone is going to die and they are feeling sad or fearful about it, they may ask questions such as “does it hurt?”, “what does it look like?”, or “when will it happen?”, as well as express their sadness or fear. It is important to remember that children who have been excluded from earlier discussions about the illness may not feel comfortable talking about their concerns now. It is common for children who have not been given enough information to feel anger, anxiety and mistrust. Find ways to speak with the child often and in language they can understand about illness, dying, death and grief.

At this age, children are increasingly involved in activities and relationships outside of their homes and families. Classmates, teammates and friends take on new importance. Children likely spend a significant amount of time with friends, sharing common interests and social experiences. However, they don’t tend to talk about things like illness or death. For example, a child is unlikely to turn to a friend for answers to their

questions about dying. However, doing things with friends is a major part of how children cope with stress, illness and death. It provides the child with a non-threatening and natural outlet for emotions and gives them a sense of control and competence.

When Someone is Very Ill

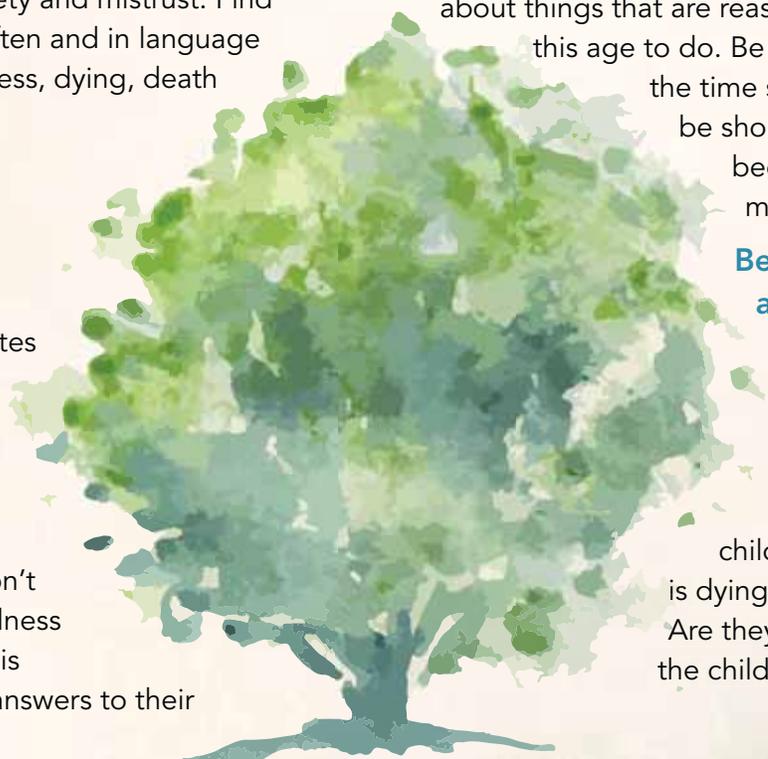
Give the child information when the disease is diagnosed and let them know about each new change in the illness. The information should include the name of the disease, any known causes and treatments. The child will be more accepting when they are included. Explain any changes in the sick person’s behavior or the family’s routines as a result of the disease or its treatment. For example, if the sick person will lose their hair and experience other side effects from chemotherapy, it will be helpful to explain, ahead of time, that this is normal and expected. Give basic information regularly (as it is known) to help them identify and express their feelings and thoughts before the shock of approaching death.

Explore the child’s interest in spending time with and helping the person who is ill. The child may have a natural curiosity about the person, wanting (and fearing) to know what the ill person looks like. The child may want to spend time with them or to be involved in some way. For example, although a child should not be left alone to take care of an ill person, helping to prepare a meal or making a playlist of the person’s favorite music might be a good way for a child to be involved. Be sensible and creative when thinking about things that are reasonable for a child

this age to do. Be sure they understand the time spent together may be shorter than they hope because the dying person may be tired or unwell.

Be aware of any alliances or conflicts the child has with the person who is dying. It is important

to think carefully about how both the child and the person who is dying feel about each other. Are they best friends? Does the child go to him or her



whenever something is hurting or needs fixing? Is their relationship difficult? Do they argue often? Does the child relate to the dying person because they are alike or different? Thinking about these questions will help you understand what will be lost and where the gaps will be for the child after this person dies. It is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of their relationship and be willing to identify any aspects the child may struggle with.

Allow the child to remain involved in regular after-school activities, sports and visits with friends.

The child is at an age when these activities are vitally important. Developing activities, interests and friendships outside of the home and family helps the child build a healthy self-esteem and an extended support network. Try to maintain usual after-school routines and make play time with friends a priority.

Educate and update the significant adults in the child's life.

Since children this age may be unlikely to initiate discussions with adults about the disease or its progression, you might encourage other adults to bring it up. For example, you might provide them with information you have found helpful and give them permission to raise the topic if it feels appropriate. Also, the child may be encouraged to know these adults have lived through losses and to hear what they felt or learned.

When Someone has Died

Encourage the child to participate in family rituals after the death. Explain the purpose of these rituals and invite them to take part in any planning or preparation. Talk with them about the possible duties they might wish to have such as helping to write the obituary or helping at the funeral. You might consider whether they would like to contribute their thoughts or feelings to a speech given at the service or other gathering. For example, they might like to make a list of their favorite memories or the things they liked most about the person who died. Find out if they would like any friends to be at the ceremony and help them to extend these invitations.

Return to former routines and prepare the child for any necessary changes in these routines.

After a death, family life is different. Usual eating, sleeping and living routines will be in disorder for a while and some may be permanently changed. This state of confusion can be difficult for a child so it is important to continue the routines that help them to feel secure and looked after. For example, continue with normal bed and meal times, and getting the child to school, even though you and the child may not feel like it. Family meetings can provide you with a chance to bring up and talk about any upcoming changes. (If the family doesn't presently have family meetings, now may be a good time to begin.)

Be aware the child may not know how to grieve.

This may be the child's first experience with death, and they will look to you for guidance about what to do with the many reactions, feelings and questions that surface as part of their grief. This doesn't mean you need to be the perfect model of grief, but how you grieve will strongly influence how the child grieves. For example, if you leave the room whenever you cry, the child will learn they must not cry in front of other people. Even though most children this age can stand only brief displays of emotion (whether their own or another person's) it is important the adults around them model healthy ways to express common emotions. Spontaneous but controlled moments of crying will help the child to see that expressing and sharing emotions is normal. To help the child express their grief, it may be helpful to look at family photos or visit the cemetery together.

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When a parental figure has died, expect changes in the child's behavior. A child whose parental figure has died will be full of emotions, particularly fear, guilt and sadness. One way a child may cope with these intense feelings is to act them out. A grieving child may become unmanageable and demanding. This can present as frequent sulking, clinging or misbehavior. Be aware these difficult behaviors tend to be most extreme at home and directed at the remaining parent or caregiver. If the parental figure who died was the main disciplinarian, it will be important that you develop your own way of maintaining order and respect in the family. If you are at a loss about how to do this, ask other parents you respect, teachers, or school counselors for help. Also, there are agencies in most communities that offer parenting support or information classes.

Suggested Books for Children 9-11 Years Old

Everybody Needs a Rock by Byrd Taylor: This book explains the importance of support when going through a challenging time. It highlights the fact that not everyone's support will look the same despite a universal need for it.

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst: An illustration of the invisible connections between our hearts and those who are important to us. 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.

Tear Soup by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen: This book is good for children and adults of any age and illustrates how grief is similar to the act of making soup. Many different ingredients go into both processes and it takes work. It is the story of a woman named Grandy who eventually finds comfort through the process of making tear soup.

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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