

# **Supporting Young Children with Death and Dying**

*A resource for families and teachers*

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*Adapted from a document I originally created for [the Children's Community School](#),  
with thanks to [child psychologist Steven Glazier](#)*

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The death of someone close—or even not so close—can be a difficult experience for anyone. Young children (ages 0 to 8, roughly) can simultaneously have an easier and harder time of it than adults; their inability to conceive of death as fully as older people can make it more confusing, but can also make it easier to let go of.

Talking or thinking about death may bring up strong feelings for children, but that does not mean that talking or thinking about death is inappropriate. Death is a part of the human experience, and it is okay for children to think and talk about it, especially when it is something impacting their family or community.

Below are some tips and resources for families and teachers that I've found helpful. If you have other suggestions to offer, or questions you wish were addressed, please [email me](#).

If your family has experienced the death of a loved one, or if you expect you may be experiencing this soon, I recommend seeking some professional support, to help guide you and your child in a challenging time. I offer [coaching services for parents and families](#), and have supported many families through periods of grieving.

## **The following things are all normal experiences for young children in the days, weeks, and months after someone they know dies.**

*Note that just because all these experiences are common for young children does not mean that they ought to be easy for you to deal with. Even "normal" reactions can be difficult to experience, and it's okay to ask for support.*

- Strong emotions, including sadness, anger, and fear—perhaps connected to the topic of the death itself, or perhaps not, which may or may not respond to usual comfort strategies
- Strong emotions that change quickly and unexpectedly—for instance, being very sad one moment and then being silly and joking the next moment
- Challenging behaviors—aggression, boundary testing, extreme silliness, etc.
- Behavior regressions—for example, having potty accidents that haven't happened for awhile
- Changes in pretend play, or pretend play that is very dramatic—for example, pretending to be a baby, or pretending to be dying, or pretending to interact with someone who is dead or dying
- Being (or appearing to be) insensitive—for instance, talking about serious things in a joking tone, or teasing someone who is clearly upset

- Curiosity—about death, about feelings, about anything. It’s normal for children to ask lots of questions, or to ask the same questions over and over again
- Magical thinking—for example, “I know grandma is dead, but she’ll be back after dinner” or “Grandpa died because I yelled at him last week”
- Normal behavior and emotions; not responding to the death in any obvious way
- Delayed reactions—seeming fine for some days or weeks, and then later showing some of the feelings or behaviors listed above

### Here are some general strategies for talking to a child about what’s going on:

- **Be honest.** Even when it’s hard, say the truth. If you’re not able to say the truth, say “I can’t talk about it right now” rather than saying something untrue.
  - If you don’t give children real information, they are likely to fill in the blanks with their own guesses, which may be more upsetting than the truth.
- **Use simple, straightforward language.** Children are likely to misunderstand metaphors and euphemisms like “She’s resting now” or “He went home,” and those misunderstandings can be confusing and scary. Simple sentences like “She died” can be harder for some adults to say or hear, but are often helpful to children.
- **Talk about feelings, and normalize a range of feelings.** For instance, “I’m crying because I miss my brother, and I’m very sad. I think I’ll be sad for a very long time. When someone dies, it’s normal to be sad, and it’s okay to be sad.” Or, “You’re feeling very energetic, and maybe a little bit confused, and so you’re running around and crashing into things. Sometimes people feel that way at a funeral.”
- **Differentiate feelings from behaviors.** “It’s okay to be mad that grandpa is dead. I’m mad too. Even when you’re mad, you may not throw hard toys. Let’s go find some things that are good for throwing.” Or, “It’s okay to feel energetic and confused at a funeral, but it’s not okay to run and crash at a funeral. Let’s go outside.”
- **Give a little bit of information at a time.** Give simple, straightforward answers to questions children ask, and try not to answer questions that they aren’t asking.
  - ... but also, remember that not all questions are verbal, for children of any age. Try responding to facial expressions and behaviors as if they were spoken questions. “Your face looks confused. Are you wondering what’s going on?” Or, “I see that you’re wondering if I will stop you from pushing your sister even when I’m crying. The answer is yes, I will still stop you, but I really wish I didn’t have to.”
- **Acknowledge scary uncertainties while also saying true, comforting things.** For instance, “That’s true, we don’t know for sure when each person will die, and that can feel scary. But I’m very sure that you and I won’t die for a very long time. And no matter what happens, there will always be people around who will love you and take care of you.”
- **It’s okay to say “I don’t know.”** It’s okay to say “I need some time to think about that, can you ask me again later?”
- **Your child doesn’t need you to be perfect at this. Your child needs you to be YOU.**
  - ... speaking of which, one of the best things you can do for your child is to make sure your needs are being met. Do you have the support you need? Do you have someone

to talk to? Do you have access to resources that would make your life work more smoothly while you grieve? Now is the time to ask for help.

These strategies may be hard to keep in mind for an adult who is experiencing grief themselves. When primary caregivers are grieving, it's best for children to have access to trusted adults who have the emotional space to give the child's experience their full attention. At the same time, it's okay for children to see what it's like for their loved ones to experience grief—in fact, it's a crucial part of processing their own experiences.

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### Further reading and resources

- [When Someone a Child Loves Dies](#), from the Fred Rogers Institute—Click “download” to view the PDF guide; links to other resources.
- [Helping Children Deal With Grief](#), from the Child Mind Institute—A guide for families. Also available in Spanish.
- [When Difficult Things Happen](#): A guide from the Fred Rogers Institute for supporting children through hard moments in life
- [Mister Rogers, “Death of a Goldfish”](#)—A wonderful, gentle episode of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood from 1970 in which his pet goldfish dies. He tries to revive it, then buries it; he reminisces about the beloved pet dog that died when he was a child; and talks to children directly and simply about navigating grief. (There are also segments of the episode about other topics.) Appropriate for all ages to view. (Can also be streamed/purchased on Amazon Prime Video)

### Recommended books for young children about death and dying

*Age ranges are my own recommendations. Starred books are ones I especially recommend.*

- ★ [Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children](#), by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen—A beautifully illustrated and written description of the nature of death for all living things. Straightforward, factual, and gentle. (Ages 3+)
- ★ [The Tenth Good Thing About Barney](#), by Judith Viorst and Erik Blegvad—A story about a child responding to the death of his pet cat. Kind and gentle, explores emotions and thoughts. Can be a nice book to read even when a human has died, as a way to explore the idea at a bit of a distance. (Ages 2–8)
- ★ [Death is Stupid](#), by Anastasia Higginbotham—A kind and very direct book about the experience of death and grieving. Especially valuable for giving kids tools to navigate the many unhelpful things people might say to them. Explores some of the more unpleasant thoughts and feelings that death can bring up in a refreshingly candid way. (Ages 4+)
- ★ [The Bear and the Wildcat](#), by Kazumi Yumoto and Komako Sakai—This beautiful story about friendship comes at the topic of death a little bit from the side; maybe be good for children who aren’t ready to think about death too directly. (All ages)

- [Bear Island](#), by Matthew Cordell—A lovely, soft story about a child missing a dog who has died. Loose and metaphorical, it explores some feelings that might come up around death without being too direct. (Ages 2+)
- [Because I Already Loved You](#), by Andrée-Anne Cyr and Bérengère Delaporte—A sweet story about a child getting ready for the birth of a new sibling, and the experiences come when the baby dies during childbirth. (Ages 3+)
- [Cape](#), by Kevin Johnson and Kitt Thomas—A young Black boy finds courage in the face of the death of his father (or possibly uncle) by wearing a cape. Beautifully Explores many of the feelings and events a child might experience after the death of a close family member. (Ages 3–7)
- [City Dog, Country Frog](#), by Mo Willems and Jon J Muth—A charming story of friendship between two animals with very different life cycles, and how the dog handles the frog’s surprising-to-him disappearance. A good story for kids who might not want to think about death too directly. (All ages)
- [The Dead Bird](#), by Margaret Wise Brown and Christian Robinson—A story about a group of children who find a dead bird in a park. Some adults may be put off by a seemingly playful approach to death, but the book is a great illustration of how children may process death in ways that mix playfulness with serious emotion. (Ages 0–6)
- [I Miss You: A First Look at Death](#), by Pat Thomas—A nonfiction description of death, grieving, and cultural practices. Comforting in its matter-of-fact delivery, it leaves space for a child to contemplate their own experiences. (Ages 3–8)
- [Missing Mommy](#), by Rebecca Cobb—A simple story about complex feelings after the death of a mother. More about bereavement than death per se. (All ages)
- [Missing Violet](#), by Kelly Swemba and Fabiana Faiallo—A story about the illness and death of a best friend, and about managing emotions as time goes on. (Ages 3–8)
- [Remembering](#), by Xelena González and Adriana M. Garcia—A beautiful book about a child honoring and remembering her pet dog. (Ages 3–6)
- [The Scar](#), by Charlotte Moundlic and Olivier Tallec—A story about growing up in the context of the death of a mother. (Ages 5+)
- [Sitting Shiva](#), by Erin Silver and Michelle Theodore—A Jewish girl grieving for her mother, and how she and her father process together. The story is specific to the Jewish practice of sitting shiva, but the emotions are universal. (Ages 4+)
- [When a Pet Dies](#), by Fred Rogers—Loving and direct, Mr. Rogers talks children through the death of a pet. Lovely photos of different kids and families having these experiences. (Ages 2–8)
- [Where Lily Isn’t](#), by Julie Paschkis and Margaret Chodos-Irvine—A sweet book about the death of a pet dog. (Ages 3–7)

See also “[When Someone your Child Loves Dies: A Booklist from the Fred Rogers Institute](#)”—This resource is organized by different types of relationship.

Remember, if your family is going through a hard time, consider seeking professional support. I offer [coaching for families](#) in a wide range of circumstances, including those experiencing grief.