



THE CONSORTIUM ON TRAUMA  
ILLNESS, AND GRIEF IN SCHOOLS

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## **Parent Guidelines for Supporting your Child during Grief**

You may not have one perfect response to grief, indeed there may not even be one perfect response. You can listen carefully and offer children an opportunity to express their feelings.

### **Ways to Help:**

- Be patient and compassionate- the grieving process is sporadic and occurs over time.
- Listen
- Observe changes in behavior
- Continue to provide limits for behavior, be firm yet gentle
- Be honest, but do not give unnecessary details
- Talk about feelings associated with grief. Let your child know that there is no one "correct" response when feeling grief.

### **Needs of the Grieving Child**

- To be allowed to grieve
- To have their loss acknowledged and validated
- To have accurate information about the event
- Careful listening
- Provide support for overwhelming feelings
- Continuation of routine activities (getting rest, eating well, exercise or summer activities your child would ordinarily do)
- Opportunities to remember

### **Understanding the Grief Cycle**

Children grieve sporadically. Every child's grief experience is unique and individual. It is not so much a forward progression through the grief cycle, but a working through grief. These are some common experiences:

- shock and denial
- protest and strong emotions
- disorientation
- deep sadness (hopelessness, fear of failure, aimlessness, irritability)
- acceptance
- adjustment

### **Typical Responses to loss from Younger Children:**

How children react will depend on the relationship they had with the person who died, their age, and their prior experience with death. Preschool age children do not understand that death is final and may confuse death with sleep or someone taking a trip. They may show greater interest in things that are dead. As children reach elementary age, they do begin to understand that death is final and this concept often creates more fear and sadness. Children in both age groups typically have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally as they either do not have the ability to do so or find that talking about death is too anxiety provoking. Children will often display their feelings in their behavior and play, so it is important to be more watchful of how they act and what they do rather than what they say.

### **Typical Responses to Loss from Adolescents:**

As children get older, their responses begin to resemble adult reactions to trauma but may also have a combination of some more childlike reactions mixed with adult responses. Their own

personal histories with loss will contribute to their reactions. Most adolescents know that death is final and universal. While they are more knowledgeable that life is fragile, they tend to believe that they are immortal and invincible which can lead to risk-taking behavior. Adolescents may blame themselves. Teens may romanticize death and fantasize about their own death and reaction of others. They may not show their feelings for fear of appearing weak or needing to appear in control of their feelings.

### **Some responses/feelings across both ages may include:**

- physical complaints
- separation anxiety (i.e., wanting to be close to parents or other loved ones more often/fear of being alone)
- behaving impulsively
- crankiness or irritability
- arguing, screaming, fighting
- acting like it never happened
- confusion about why the person/people died
- inaccurately blame themselves or others
- poor concentration
- aggressiveness
- withdrawal
- sleep disturbance and/or nightmares
- appetite increase or decrease
- decreases in energy level
- shock
- indifference
- depression,
- feelings of vulnerability and anxiety (maybe this could happen to me or someone else that I care about)
- anxiety
- loneliness
- anger
- sadness
- abandonment
- guilt
- fearfulness
- worry
- isolation

**Some other thoughts to consider: It is important for you as a parent to recognize your own needs and feelings, obtain support when you need it from other adults and to take good care of yourself. If you have particular concerns about your child and their ability to cope right now, please let school staff know.**

# My Grief Rights: Ten Healing Rights for Grieving Children

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Someone you love has died. You are probably having many hurtful and scary thoughts and feelings right now. Together those thoughts and feelings are called *grief*, which is a normal (though really difficult) thing everyone goes through after someone they love has died.

The following ten rights will help you understand your grief and eventually feel better about life again. Use the ideas that make sense to you. Post this list on your refrigerator or on your bedroom door or wall. Re-reading it often will help you stay on track as you move toward healing from your loss. You might also ask the grown-ups in your life to read this list so they will remember to help you in the best way they can.

**1. I have the right to have my own unique feelings about the death.** I may feel mad, sad or lonely. I may feel scared or relieved. I may feel numb or sometimes not anything at all. No one will feel exactly like I do.

**2. I have the right to talk about my grief whenever I feel like talking.** When I need to talk, I will find someone who will listen to me and love me. When I don't want to talk about it, that's OK, too.

**3. I have the right to show my feelings of grief in my own way.** When they are hurting, some kids like to play so they'll feel better for awhile. I can play or laugh, too. I might also get mad and scream. This does not mean I am bad, it just means I have scary feelings that I need help with.

**4. I have the right to need other people to help me with my grief, especially grown-ups who care about me.** Mostly I need them to pay attention to what I am feeling and saying and to love me no matter what.

**5. I have the right to get upset about normal, everyday problems.** I might feel grumpy and have trouble getting along with others sometimes.

**6. I have the right to have "griefbursts".** Griefbursts are sudden, unexpected feelings of sadness that just hit me sometimes-even long after the death. These feelings can be very strong and even scary. When this happens, I might feel afraid to be alone.

**7. I have the right to use my beliefs about my god to help me deal with my feelings of grief.** Praying might make me feel better and somehow closer to the person who died.

**8. I have the right to try to figure out why the person I loved died.** But it's OK if I don't find an answer. Why questions about life and death are the hardest questions in the world.

**9. I have the right to think and talk about my memories of the person who died.** Sometimes those memories will be happy and sometimes they might be sad. Either way, these memories help me keep alive my love for the person who died.

**10. I have the right to move toward and feel my grief and, over time, to heal.** I'll go on to live a happy life, but the life and death of the person who died will always be a part of me. I'll always miss this special person.

