A RESOURCE FROM NAGC MEMBERS

National Alliance for Grieving Children

Talking about End of Life Memorials & Rituals

Grief Talk is an initiative of the NAGC launched in the summer of 2020 aimed at encouraging and supporting honest conversations around the topics of death and grief. This initiative has produced the following resources:

Talking to Children About Death and Dying
Talking to a Child or Teen to Let them know Someone has Died
Talking about End of Life Memorials and Rituals
Talking about Grieving as a Family

Visit ChildrenGrieve.org to find these and other resources.

Thank you to the following NAGC member organizations and individuals who contributed the content for this resource: (Listed alphabetically by last name. Highlighted names desigante the lead authors for this guide.)

Erin Brodbeck, LCSW, CT, Director of Grief Services, Sunset Funeral Homes (Champaign, IL)
Karina Castillo, LCSW, Children's Grief Support Program Manager, Community Hospice (Modesto, CA)
Colleen Cherry, Founder, PlayWell Child Life Services(Laguna Niguel, CA)
Alyssa Christensen, Grief Support Director, Mourning Hope Grief Center (Lincoln, Nebraska)
Lauren Clarke, Program Manager, Bridges for End-of-Life (Charleston, SC)
Lisa Conn, MSW, LISW-S, CAPT, Bereavement Counseling Professional, Ohio's Hospice of Dayton (Dayton, OH)
Pamela Gabbay, EdD, FT, Co-Founder, The Satori Group (Virginia Beach, VA)
Peggy Galimberti, LMSW- Clinical, ACSW, Program Director, Ele's Place (Ann Arbor, MI)
Heather Gianatassio, Certified Child Life Specialist and Grief Counselor
Melissa Lunardini, MA, MBA, CEO, Radical Grief, LLC (San Diego, CA)
Valerie Myers MS, CT, CEO, Myers Compassionate Grief Services, LLC (Owings Mills, MD)
Kaela O'Donnell, MSW, LCSWA, Program Therapist, KinderMourn (Charlotte, NC)
Buffy Peters, Director, Hamilton's Academy of Grief & Loss (Des Moines, Iowa)
Irwin Sandler, Research Professor, Resilient Parenting for Bereaved Families (Phoenix, AZ)
Corrie Sirota MSW, PSW, Clinical Social Worker & Psychotherapist, Author and Clinical Director of Myra's Kids Foundation (Montreal, Quebec)
Blair Stockton, MS, CCLS, CTP, CGCS, Compass Child and Teen Grief Services Coordinator, Four Seasons Hospice and Palliative Care (Flat Rock, NC)

Copyright © 2020 by National Alliance for Grieving Children. All rights reserved. You can quote, link to, re-post or translate this article, in its entirety, as long as you credit the NAGC and add a working link back to the NAGC's website. www.ChildrenGrieve.org

Introduction

End of life memorials and rituals that follow the death of someone loved are very important. Memorials and rituals mark the transition of life to death and provide an opportunity to honor and reflect over the life of the deceased. In addition, memorials and rituals allows family, friends and the community to gather together and support one another and the grieving family.

As these events offer support, comfort, and meaning for those grieving and provides a safe venue for the physical and emotional expression of grief, they are incredibly important after a death.

Use Concrete Language

When talking with a child about these rituals, one of the first things to be sure that the child understands is what it means when we say that their special person has died. Be sure to use concrete language and no euphemisms in your conversation. Even for a small child they will understand, "when someone dies their body stops working".

Use concrete language.
For example, "Your grandpa had a heart attack and died. That means his heart stopped working and that made his body stop working. Does that make sense?"

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

7 Tips for Talking to Bereaved Children & Teens about End of Life Memorials/Rituals

Grief is Ongoing
Kids continue to grieve through each developmental milestone.

Talk about the death.
Help them to realize that this a normal and natural process. Whether you talk about it or not, the child/teen will grieve. Normalizing the process helps them to better understand their grief.

Grief is shaped by culture.
Grief is shaped by culture. Different cultures and families will have a variety of traditions, rituals and beliefs regarding end of life ceremonies, and their views on grief.

Validatation is Key
There is no such thing as good or bad feelings- feelings are just feelings and are called "feelings" because we are supposed to feel them. Avoid labeling certain feelings, such as anger, loneliness, sadness, or grief, as bad. This creates a negative connotation and affirms a desire to avoid such feelings. Instead, discuss with kids that certain feelings may be hard or more difficult to understand, process, etc., but encourage them to talk to you about them.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Be Flexible

It doesn't have to be all or nothing when it comes to the attending end of life memorials & rituals. Give the child or teen permission once they have had the opportunity to discuss what's ahead to decide whether they attend. Support them in the decisions they make.

Use Simple, Direct Language

Be sure to use the words: death, dying and died. Using euphemisms and other words in place of "dead" can confuse the child (passed away, lost, etc.). They need simple and direct language.

Talk about death honestly and use age appropriate language.

2-5 years: Respond with simple, repeated explanations to their questions. Be truthful. Saying "I don't know" is more than okay. You're not supposed to have all the answers, and it's okay for the child to know that.

5-8 years: Focus on simple, direct, assurance, explanations. May be curious about death and recognize finality. Keep in mind kids of this age group may avoid asking questions as a way to "protect" the adults in their life. Provide them with opportunities to ask questions. It is key to model good coping skills.

8-12 years: Conversations should acknowledge, reflect, accept, and reassure. Be honest. Support them with information and answers to questions. As with younger children, keep in mind that kids of this age group may avoid asking questions as a way to "protect" the adults in their life. Provide them with opportunities to ask questions. It is key to model good coping skills.

13+: Teens have the ability to be more abstract in language. Respect privacy and listen without judgement. Be attentive and support their searching for answers.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Remember, this is not a one-time conversation. Children will continue to process the death and grieve as they continue to develop. As children grow and change, their concept and understanding of death also grows and changes.

There is an expression that children "grow with grief". This is espe cially evident at milestones in the child's life where the absence of the person who died is felt more strongly.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Let A Child's Questions Lead The Conversation

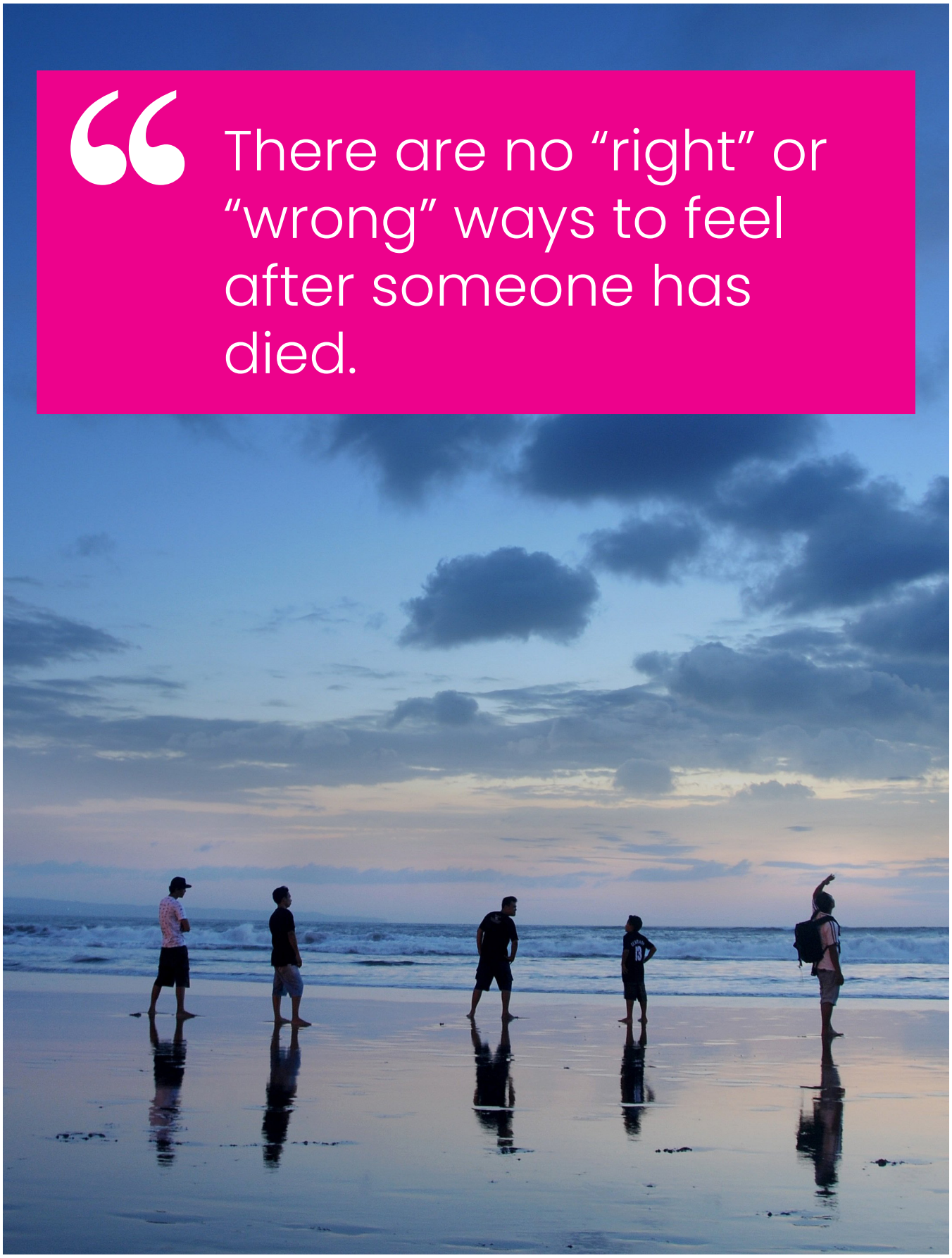
Let a child's questions lead the conversation. If a child is old enough to ask a question they are old enough to hear the answer. Whatever the cause of death is, it is important that we are honest with children about how their person died. We all deserve the truth and hiding this information can cause distrust and hinder a child's grief process. Remember, this is their story too. Where there was attachment, there will be grief. When we aren't honest with kids, resentment can build when the truth finally comes out (and it will eventually). It's never too late to have that conversation.

Keep in mind that children may ask questions over and over again. This is natural part of their process in learning about death and how it is permanent. Just keep answering them honestly and consistently. They are trying to better understand, so each time you answer they will gain more insight. As their understanding of death grows so do their questions.

When you are faced with a question you don't have the answers to, it is okay to answer with an "I don't know." If there is someone you can ask to find out the answer, do that and let them know in ways they can understand. If it is a question that can't be answered, reply with, "That is a great question. I don't know the answer to that either, but tell me more about what you are thinking about with that." In doing so, you are validating their questions and feelings and allowing for exploration, which helps a child who is grieving.

> "If a child is old enough to ask a question they are old enough to hear the answer.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org



© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Discuss What Happens to the Body

Children are naturally interested in learning what happens to a body after death. One explanation is that after someone dies, we take care of their body. The most common options for the final disposition of the body is burial or cremation. Whether the body is buried or cremated, the end result is the same: the body reduces to "ashes" – or only the bones remain.

If the person's body is cremated or buried, it is helpful to prepare a child and talk to them about what will take place, what they can expect to see and experience at the funeral/ memorial service. For example, let the child know that some people may be laughing and telling funny stories, some may be crying, and some may show no emotion.

Assure the child there are no "right" or "wrong" ways to feel after someone has died. When we can properly prepare the child for what they will experience, they will be far less likely to be afraid or uncomfortable in this new environment.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

TIP FOR TALKING TO CHILDREN

Use clear, concrete, and age appropriate language when talking about death to children.

Example how to explain the process of cremation:

The person's body is placed into a special box and then taken to the crematory. In the crematory, the special box, with the person's body, gets placed into a "chamber" or what looks like a large special oven, lined with brick. The cremation chamber gets very, very hot and the heat helps to change the person's body so that all that are left are the bones or "ashes". An Urn is a special container used to hold a person's ashes or "cremains".

Example how to explain the process of burial:

The person's body is placed into a special box called a casket and then taken to a cemetery. There will be a special place in the cemetery called a gravesite where the casket will be lowered into the earth and covered back up. This site will be marked with a tombstone or a headstone that records the name of the person who is buried in the gravesite.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Discuss the End of Life Ceremony

Explain what the end of life ceremony will entail and any expectations [i.e., specific dress, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, rituals they may see and can or cannot partake in, etc.] beforehand.

To the best of your ability, explain the why behind the type of ceremony that will happen. Children deserve and like to know the why behind things. This can be an opportunity to educate your child (and yourself) on cultural practices that may differ from your own.
If appropriate, ask the child how they would want to be involved in the services and follow their lead.

Consider including the child/teen in the end of life ritual. Consider inviting the child to help make decisions. This gives them the opportunity to be involved and gives them some sense of control in an out of control situation. They can help pick out the music, photos to display, the casket or urn color, etc.

Another way to involve children is to invite them to draw a picture or write a letter to go in the casket or be cremated with their loved one. The child could read the letter at the service or with other family members if they would like to share it.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Viewing The Body

If the child is going to view the person's body, it is important to give them a mental picture of what they will be seeing first.

One approach you can use to help guide you is the **five senses approach:** what will they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

Discuss What the Child Will See

Be sure you have viewed the person and the room before the child, so you can describe how their person's body looks now – i.e., 'in a special box called a casket'; or 'on a special table with a pillow and covered with a blanket'- and what the layout of the room is.

Discuss What the Body Will Look Like

Clarify that their person will look a lot like they are sleeping: eyes are closed and lying down, but this isn't the same as sleeping. When adults tell children that their deceased loved one is "just sleeping," it can cause subsequent sleeping issues in the child as they may think they will never wake up if they go to sleep.

Discuss What the Body Will Feel Like

Talk about what it will feel like if they touch the body – the person's body isn't "cold" – it is the temperature of the room because the blood is no longer flowing through their body. If the person is embalmed, let them know that the skin will feel more firm because of the preparations made to the body to get it ready for the services.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Answer Questions and Concerns
Ask the child if they have any questions or worries. Let the child take the lead as to when they are ready to go in. Give the child control over how close they would like to be to their person, and whether or not they want to see or touch the body. Make sure they know the choice is theirs, and either way is "okay".

Respect and Honor the Child's Decision
After getting all of the information and questions answered, if a child decides, they do not want to see their person's body that needs to be respected and validated. A child should not be forced to do anything we think they may regret later. There are always alternatives.

Gather Mementos
Talk with the person overseeing the services to see if you can take a picture of the person, their hands, the casket, etc. if you think the child might want to see it later. And know if this is before a visitation or wake, there are also other opportunities for the child to change their minds. Be sure to bring home mementos like the program or folder from the service so the child can have a keepsake. Share with them some of the things you observed or remember, who was there, and songs played, etc.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Suggestions for During the Memorial or Ritual

End of life ceremonies include, but are not limited to: wakes, viewings/visitations, memorial services, graveside burials, internment, scattering of ashes (cremated remains), church services, masses, funerals, receptions, and end of life celebrations.

There is no one correct way to commemorate the death of a loved one. Culture, religion, and spiritual views often play a role in how a family or community decides to commemorate someone's death.

A person may include their wishes for how they would like their family and friends to celebrate or commemorate them in their will. Other times, death can be sudden or unexpected, so the person's family and friends decide if and how they would like to hold an end of life ceremony.

Depending on who the end of life ceremony is for, ask yourself and be honest about whether or not it may be helpful to have a family member or friend stay with your child(ren) throughout the process of the ceremony. Non-immediate family members, friends, and those in your support system are looking for ways to help and be of service to your family during this time.

Having someone as an assigned "buddy" allows you to partake in the ceremony, be more present, and relieve you of the responsibility of making sure your child is okay throughout the process. Sit with your child beforehand to decide who their "buddy" will be and make them a part of that decision.

REMINDER: Be honest about the potential emotional state you may be in and normalize needing help when things are hard.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

> Remember that you and your child can choose which rituals and aspects of the end of life ceremony the child will participate in.

Remember that you and your child can choose which rituals and aspects of the end of life ceremony the child will participate in. Not all rituals will work and are appropriate for all children- it depends upon their ability to focus, maintain attention, and desire to participate.

Fortunately, it does not have to be all or nothing. It's okay for a child to decide not to participate in an aspect of the ceremony. For example, children under the age of four may not do as well during a formal ceremony like a funeral or mass service. Still, they will be perfectly content at a less formal service like a visitation or celebration of life.

Save mementos and share them with your child/teen.
If you and your child decide they will not be a part of certain aspects of the ceremony, save mementos such as prayer cards, service programs, photos, flowers, etc. to share with them after the fact.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

If there are opportunities for your child to be involved in the ceremony, talk through those opportunities with them beforehand and reassure them, it's okay to change their mind at any point. It may help to have a back-up plan if they are struggling or decide they no longer want to partake in certain aspects of the ceremony.

Additional tips

- Offer to stand with the child as they read/sing/play music/etc. if they decide to participate in the ceremony.
- Validate and normalize if you or your child need to take breaks at any point during the ceremony. Show them a space they can go to should they (or you) need a break during the ceremony.
- Arrive early to the ceremony's location to give you and your child plenty of time to get acclimated to the new environment.
- If applicable, introduce the child to the person in charge of running aspects of the ceremony or service (example: Funeral Director, Celebrant, etc.) who can answer any additional questions about the process.
- Check-in with your child as you arrive and throughout the process. Ask what questions they have and encourage them to write things down throughout the ceremony for you all to process afterward together.

WAYS FOR CHILDREN TO BE A PART OF END OF LIFE CEREMONIES & RITUALS

Reading A Letter, Poem, Or Passage From A Spiritual Text

Playing Music

Singing

Displaying Artwork

Putting Something Inside The Casket, Grave, Etc.

Serving As A Pallbearer

Passing Out Ceremony Programs

Choosing A Special Color For Everyone To Wear In Honor Of A Loved One

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Alternative ideas if the child cannot attend the ceremony
(due to restrictions, inability to travel, family dynamics, cultural considerations, etc.):

- If the service will be live-streamed, watch the service live or at a later time together.
- Have the child plan a service of their own. They can do it at the same time the person's ceremony would have been or on a special chosen day/time. Consider involving the child in the selection of a specific day. You could potentially coordinate with other family members, do together over FaceTime, Zoom, etc. During the ceremony, have everyone share their favorite memories of a loved one who died.
- Light a candle at a designated time in honor of the person who died.
- Visit the gravesite or other special place to leave a small keepsake, such as a decorated rock.
- Ask the child what they would like to do to honor their person and get creative! (Technology can be beneficial in creating meaningful keepsakes for kids.)

After the Memorial or Ritual

- Check in with your child and talk about their experience. Answer any questions they may have.
- Put away for safekeeping any item you saved from the funeral/ritual.
- As you are able, find your way in creating new routines, structure and predictability into your life.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Remembrance Activities

These can be something you do once or can be done multiple times on special anniversaries of birthdays, holidays, or other special occasions.

Light a candle:

Light a candle: Remind children that lighting a candle can offer the comfort of thinking about the person who died, but when they blow the candle out, that does not mean they stop thinking of them. Candles can be relit when a child or family wants. Children can also decorate the candle holder with words or pictures of the person that died.

Release biodegradable balloons, butterflies, lanterns:

You can have time with friends and family where you write notes to the loved one, read them aloud, or send them up with the balloons or lanterns.

Host a Remembrance Event

Family and friends join together and have an impersonal time of reflection of the person who died. (in-person or virtually)

Create a Memory book of letters from others about the person who died

Have others who knew their person write a letter of what that person meant to them or a special story they would like to share. This can be something special the child and family can keep for a lifetime.

Share a memory

Telling stories and sharing memories is a great way to continue to feel connected to the person who died. They are such a precious gift for the family.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Honor the deceased through charitable deeds

Participate in a walk or race, start a foundation, or make a donation.

Seek out a support group/camp

Give yourself the time and space to process grief and share memories. Find support near you at childrengrieve.org/find-support.

Write a letter or make a card to give to the surviving family

Let the family know they are in your thoughts.

Journal thoughts and feelings Create a memory shelf or memory box to keep special mementos

Appropriate for any age, this is especially important for teens!

Visit the gravesite or other meaningful place

Visiting the gravesite can allow children to reflect on where the person is buried. TIP: Explain to children that there is no pressure in routinely returning to the gravesite unless they want to.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

Rememberance Items

Utilize items that belonged to the person that died that children can keep with them or create to remind them of their special person.

Jewelry/ Jewelry With Ashes

Jewelry such as necklaces, watches, rings that the child can hold onto to remember the person. Many pieces are available that contain ashes or are even made from ashes.

Handkerchief or other personal item

Clothing

Clothing that the child can wear or wrap up in during times they miss the person

Blanket, stuffed animal or pillow out of clothing

Important: Make sure the child is ready for the clothes to be cut up. Ask them if they would like to be involved in the process.

Framed picture of the person who died

Small urn of ashes.

Tip: Create a space where the urn can sit where the child feels it is best for them but also safe from damage.

Create/decorate a memory stone and put in a special place.

Plant a tree

Plant a tree in memory in a favorite park. TIP: If planting a tree, think of whether this is a place you know that you can always return to (for instance, if you move houses, sell property, etc.).

Get a memorial bench

Dedicate a memorial bench or get garden marker that can be painted or a plaque placed on in remembrance of the person who died.

Hang a Windchime

Hang a windchime where when the music plays, you can think of the person that died and the melody they brought to your life.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org

When to seek additional support

After a death, it is important to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional.

Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideation

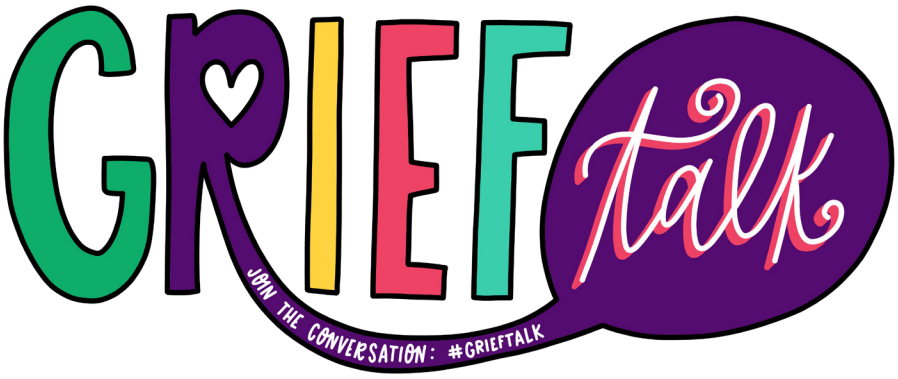
These changes can have an impact on the griever and the other family members. When changes in behavior go unnoticed and unaddressed, this can create an imbalance within the family. Addressing these changes will help create a supportive and safe environment for each member of the family.

Sometimes members in a family may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or even another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows the griever to share their story, understand that they are not alone, validate and normalize their experience. It is important to embrace a family members' readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional support in your area by visiting childrengrieve.org/find-support.

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org



Learn more at www.ChildrenGrieve.org

© 2020 National Alliance for Grieving Children | ChildrenGrieve.org