

Navigating Grief with Children

The goal is not to take away the grief, but walk together in it.

Start the conversation and don't wait for your child to come to you. Give your child the chance to talk about it and let them guide the conversation with their questions.

It is ok to cry in front of your child. Adults can express emotions to connect with children. This is a sad, painful thing, and kids need to know that adults feel the sadness too and that *they are not alone in it*.

However, make sure you have another adult with whom you can process things.

Don't rush to reassure kids in an effort to take away the pain. Help them to name what they are feeling (sadness, anger, confusion) and validate the emotion. Grief is a natural response.

Let them know you are always here for them if they want to talk about it. If they don't want to talk, know your presence and nonverbal communication matters. Pay close attention to your child and give them extra time and affection.

Focus on being honest and age-appropriate.

Depending on the age of the child, you might want to explain what death means. (You could say things like, "Death means someone's heart stops beating. People don't come back to earth after they die.") Avoid using euphemisms like *passed away*, or *is no longer here*, and speak clearly. As Christians, we can also include the hopeful reality that we get to be with Jesus for eternity after death, and there is no more sadness or sickness in heaven.

Compare suicide to a sickness in your body. The body can get sick or injured, and the same thing can happen to your mind. You might say, "Sometimes people can feel trapped and hopeless, and when feelings get really big it can be hard to think clearly.

Sometimes people make decisions that are harmful to themselves or others."

Be careful about giving kids too much information all at once. Let them set the pace with their questions and pay attention to their engagement in the conversation. Allow for ongoing conversations over the course of time. Kids may need to repeat things and ask the same questions over again; this is a normal part of processing.

Encourage play, as this is a natural way for kids to process things. Physical activity, such as going for a walk or bike ride, can help the body process traumatic events.

Grief is not linear.

Grief is not something that we walk through in a straight line, going from one stage to the next. It is a complex process that differs for each person. Remind your child that it is okay to feel sad in the days, weeks, and months to come. This is not a regression, but the mind's way of continuing to process trauma.

Children's capacity to handle grief is limited, and therefore they will express it weeks and months later in ways that may not seem congruent with grief, such as increased anxiety, not wanting to be separated from parents, acting out, withdrawing, and having physical ailments like stomach aches and headaches.

Oftentimes counseling can be more beneficial many months after the event, when life attempts to return to normal, but things still do not feel normal inside.

RESOURCES

Podcast: Risen Motherhood Episode 125: How do we talk about death with our kids?

BOOKS FOR KIDS

The Invisible String
The Rabbit Listened
When Sadness is at Your Door