

Offering our condolences

On behalf of the staff at Boston Children's Hospital, we want to offer our deepest condolences to you and your family. Although we cannot take away your pain and sorrow, our team is here to help guide you through this journey. The process you go through after a loved one dies is called bereavement. The bereavement process in children can be different from adult bereavement. It can be hard for children to make their way through it.

We have put together this resource to help you support your children through the loss of their loved one. We hope that the information provided will answer some questions you may have and offer additional resources. Although you have left the hospital, you and your child will never leave our hearts. Please reach out to your child life specialist for any further support you may need, as well as with any questions you may have about how to support your bereaved children.

With warmth,

The Child Life Department at Boston Children's Hospital



*Any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn,
but their mourning often looks different than ours.*

– Dr. Alan Wolfelt



The way that children understand the idea and reality of death depends on their developmental age and their past experiences with death and loss. It's best to be honest and use simple and clear words when explaining the loss of a loved one to children. It's important to talk in a safe place with as little distraction as possible and to allow your child to take the lead on conversations. Children often show their sadness through pain in their body, like stomachaches, headaches and other physical symptoms. Pay attention to symptoms of grief (sadness) or bereavement your child is showing. You can also reach out to resources in your community for extra support.

What should I keep in mind when telling my child difficult news?

- Try not to use euphemisms (milder or less direct ways of saying things that can feel harsh or blunt). These can be confusing for children and may lead to misunderstandings. Some examples of euphemisms include:
 - **Went to sleep:** You and your child sleep every night.
 - **Went to a better place:** Your child may want to go there, too.
 - **Went to Heaven:** It's important to talk about your religious beliefs, but be careful with younger children believing this is a physical place that they can also go to.
 - **Gone:** Where did they go?
 - **Passed away:** This is not very clear and can have many different meanings.
- It can feel difficult, but it's important to use clear and exact language. This includes words like "death," "dead" and "died."
- Let your child take the lead in these conversations. Their natural curiosity will guide your discussion.
- Your child is ready to hear the answer if they are asking a question.
- Try to avoid telling children to "be strong" or "brave." This can affect a child's bereavement process and keep them from sharing or showing their feelings.

How can I support my child after the death of a loved one?

- Give your child opportunities to have a safe place to talk or ask questions without worrying about what you (or others) will think.
- Try to build structure in your child's day. Routine will help a child feel safer and that their life is predictable (they can expect what will happen).
- Sharing your feelings and naming them shows children that it's okay to talk about emotions and makes them more willing and able to do it themselves.
- Find ways for your child to express themselves through their own hobbies and interests, like art, writing, music, dance and so on.

Infants & toddlers

- Even the youngest children grieve (feel sad about) the loss of a loved one. Children at this age can sense that the world around them has changed. They depend on their surviving loved ones to protect, love and support them.
- Keep your child's routine as consistent (regular) as possible. Routines are a way for children to feel protected and safe when there are unexpected changes in their life.

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- Give your child extra physical attention to comfort them. This gives them a sense of security.
- Share pictures of their loved one and telling stories about them. This helps to strengthen memories.

Preschool (ages 3-5)

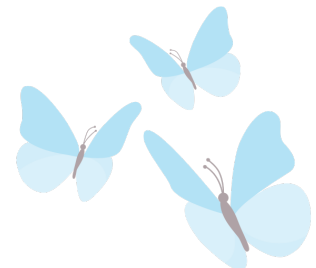
- Children at this age are concrete thinkers. This means that they focus on what they can see and feel. Abstract (can't be touched or seen) ideas are harder to understand. This means that it will be hard for them to understand what it means when someone dies. Remember to use clear language like "dead," "death" and "died."
- Some children may believe that something they did caused the death.
- Children at this age often believe death is temporary and reversible. Children may ask when their loved one is going to come back or ask where that person is now.
- Children at this age also process through repetition (saying the same thing over and over). They may repeat the same questions and thoughts many times.
- Children at this age process information and express their feelings through play. It is normal for children to include ideas about death in their play.
- Children may "act out" or show challenging behaviors. Keep in mind that children need rules and limits to feel safe. Acting out is their way of showing their need for support and guidance.
- Sometimes children will show regressive (going backward and acting younger than their age) behaviors like sucking their thumb or using baby talk. Try not to "fix" these behaviors by shaming or punishing a child. Children often fall back on what they know feels comforting. These regressions usually don't last very long.

School age (ages 6-12)

- Children at this age begin to understand that death is final and permanent.
- Some children also become more curious and interested in death. This can lead to more questions. Other children may not want to talk about it.
- Children may feel guilty and may think back to times that they fought with their loved one.
- Children at this age may begin to fear that someone else they love will also die or that the world doesn't feel as safe as it once did.
- Children at this age may feel a loss of identity: "Am I still a son/daughter/sibling/cousin/grandchild?"

Teenagers

- Teenagers still need steady and loving support as they grieve.
- Many children at this age do not have friends who can fully understand the loss of a loved one or know how to react to it.
- Teenagers are often expected to be "grown up." It is still very important to give teens the space to grieve and feel supported.
- Teens need caring adults to help them understand that it is okay to feel and show their sadness, along with other emotions. Teens can feel like they are all alone in their grief.
- They also need help knowing that the hurt they feel now won't last forever.



It is important to include children in funerals and memorials. These ceremonies are important in helping children process their thoughts and feelings. They help children acknowledge (see that it has happened) the death, remember their loved one, think about memories they shared and begin their grief process. Letting children come to these ceremonies shows children that they are a valuable part of their loved one's life.

Why are funerals important for children?

- They help children understand that someone has died.
- They provide children structure and permission to express their grief.
- They provide time for children to honor and remember their loved one.
- They give children a moment to say goodbye and express personal messages to their loved one.

How can I support my child during a funeral?

- Help get children ready for the funeral before it happens so they know what to expect. Be honest and open with children and let them take the lead by asking questions. It can be helpful to take a few moments between questions and explanations to give children time to think.
 - Talk in a safe and quiet place with little distraction.
 - Think about past experiences with funerals and death.
 - Tell your child about what will happen during the funeral. Talk about things like what the room will look like, who will be there and how long it will last.
 - Explain what your child will see if the body of the loved one will be there at the funeral.

For example, they may see a closed casket, an urn, a picture or their loved one's body in an open casket.

- Talk about the different emotions that they might see people express, like crying, being angry or even laughing at a good memory.
- Encourage children to participate in the funeral as much as they are comfortable. This can mean:
 - Choosing a song or a quote from their loved one's favorite book.
 - Helping to create a photo collage.
 - Picking a stuffed animal to bury with their loved one.
 - Drawing a picture, writing a letter or choosing a picture to put with their loved one.
- Bring children to the funeral early, if possible. This helps give them time and space to ask questions and get comfortable.
- Children may need to take breaks during the funeral. This is okay. It can be helpful to pick out a caregiver in advance who can help them step away without disturbing others.
- Whether it is a burial, visiting a grave site or significant place, or scattering ashes, being part of the funeral helps give your child a clear explanation about where their loved one's body will be.

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Helpful explanations for children

Death: When someone dies it means that their body has stopped working. They do not breathe and their heart does not beat. The body cannot feel and it does not hurt.

Morgue: A place where a dead body goes before going to the funeral home or burial place.

Funeral/memorial: An event where people go to remember and say goodbye to the person that died. (This is a good moment to explain any traditions that are meaningful to your family).

Eulogy: A speech given at a funeral about the person who died. It is a way to remember the things that made your loved one so special and important.

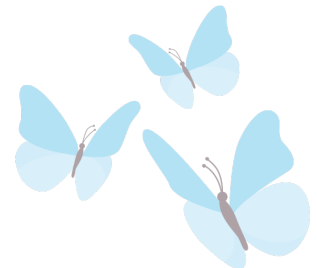
Burial: When people die, their body is sometimes put into a special box to be buried in the ground.

Casket: The special box that a dead body lies in. This is the same as a coffin.

Gravestone/headstone: A special stone placed at the grave or burial site that says the name of the person who died. People may visit the grave or burial site to remember the person who has died.

Cremation: The dead body is put in a special room that is so hot that the body turns into a special dust called ashes.

Urn: A special box or vase to hold the ashes of someone who has died.



Continued Legacy Building

A legacy is the story and memories that you remember after someone dies. Children can celebrate their loved one's legacy as a way to honor them and deal with the grief they feel about losing them. It's important for children to know that their relationship doesn't have to end when a loved one dies. You are still a family and your child is still a brother, sister, cousin or friend even though their loved one has died.



Talk about your loved one. It's okay to share memories, moments or stories at any time that feels right.



Look at pictures and keep them out around your house. These can help start conversations about your loved one and help your child remember that their loved one is still a part of their life.



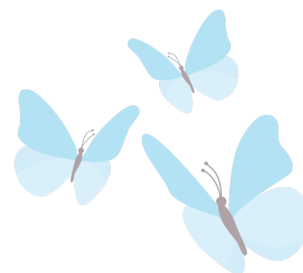
Think about making a memory box, scrapbook or collage with your child. You can include pictures of your loved one and things that remind you of them.



Holidays are often a hard time for anyone who has lost a loved one. This is especially true for children. It's okay to talk about how you and your child feel and to be aware that you may feel different ways about your loss.



Continue or create new traditions to remember your loved one on days that are important to your family.



Books for Children

General

- I Miss You: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas
- The Invisible String by Patricia Karst (with workbook)
- The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr
- The Memory Box by Joanna Rowland
- The Memory Book by Joanna Rowland (workbook)
- Where is Jess? by Joy and Marvin Johnson
- The Color Monster: A Story About Emotions by Anna Llenas
- In My Heart by Jo Witek
- Slumberkins Presents Sprite by Kelly Oriard and Callie Christensen
- Death is Stupid by Anastasia Higginbotham
- The Rabbit Listened by Cori Doerrfeld
- Something Very Sad Happened by Bonnie Zucker

Chronic or Prolonged Illness

- Gift of the Ladybug by Carole M. Amber
- Ben's Flying Flowers by Inger Maier
- Ida, Always by Caron Levis and Charles Santoso

Religious & Spiritual

- The Next Place by Warren Hanson
- God Gave Us Heaven by Lisa Bergren

Books for Teens

- Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas by Alan D. Wolfelt
- Weird Is Normal: When Teenagers Grieve by Jenny Lee Wheeler
- Grieving for the Sibling You Lost by Eric Goldblatt Hyatt and Kenneth Doka

Books for Adults about Childhood Grief

- A Child's View of Grief by Alan D. Wolfelt
- Guiding Your Child Through Grief by James and Mary Emswiler

Websites

- What's Your Grief?: whatsyourgrief.com
- The Dougy Center: dougy.org
- Center for Loss & Life Transition: centerforloss.org

Community Resources

- The Children's Room: Arlington, MA
- Local Supports by State: childrengrieve.org/find-support

Books can be purchased at: [amzn.to/2JVKKM1](https://www.amazon.com/?ref=ast_hq)

Every spring, Boston Children's Hospital families are invited to a memorial service for the children who have died. Contact the Hale Family Center for Families at BCH for details at 617-355-6279.

