

Starting the Conversation

A Guide for Parents: Talking with Your Child About Grief and Loss

You don't need perfect words. You just need to show up.

Loss comes in many forms. A child may be grieving the death of a loved one, the end of a friendship, a parent's divorce, a beloved pet, a home they left behind, or a dream that didn't come true. The shape of each loss is different — but the grief is real in every case, and every grieving child needs the same thing: a parent who shows up, listens without fixing, and keeps the door open.

This guide will help you open the conversation with your child about any kind of loss, stay present in it, and respond in ways that genuinely help.

1 All Loss Is Real Loss

One of the most common mistakes well-meaning adults make is measuring whether a child's grief is "worthy" of their pain. A child who loses a best friend to a cross-country move may feel as devastated as a child who experiences a death. A child navigating their parents' divorce may grieve for years in ways that are invisible to the adults around them.



The rule of thumb: *If it matters to your child, it matters. The size of the loss is not yours to decide — only theirs.*

Common Types of Loss Children Experience

Use the table below to understand what makes each type of loss unique and what your child may most need to hear.

Type of Loss	What Makes It Unique	What Your Child May Need to Hear
Death of a loved one	Permanent, no possibility of reconciliation or reunion. May involve shock, trauma, fear of their own mortality.	<i>"This is a real loss and your grief is real. I am here with you."</i>
Divorce or family separation	Ongoing, not fully resolved. Child may feel caught between parents, responsible for the split, or afraid of losing more.	<i>"This is not your fault. Both parents still love you. You don't have to choose sides."</i>

Type of Loss	What Makes It Unique	What Your Child May Need to Hear
A friend moving away	Often minimized by adults, but deeply felt. Loss of daily connection, shared history, and sense of belonging.	<i>"It makes complete sense that you miss them. That friendship mattered."</i>
Loss of a pet	Frequently dismissed ("it's just an animal"), yet often a child's first experience of death and grief.	<i>"Your pet was part of your life and you loved them. It is okay to grieve."</i>
Loss of a home or place	Moving, losing a home to disaster, or leaving a familiar community can feel like losing identity itself.	<i>"It's okay to miss the place you loved. We can carry those memories with us."</i>
Loss of a relationship	A falling-out with a close friend or the end of a significant friendship can bring real heartbreak.	<i>"Breaking up with a close friend hurts. You don't have to pretend it doesn't."</i>
Loss of a dream or expectation	Not making a team, a parent losing a job, a school change. Grief over what was hoped for.	<i>"It's okay to be disappointed. This isn't how you hoped it would go."</i>

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Before You Begin — Three Things to Remember

01

Pick the right moment

Side-by-side is easier than face-to-face. Try the car, a walk, or doing something together. Parallel activity lowers defenses.

02

Lead with curiosity

You're not there to fix it. You're there to understand. Listen more than you speak. Understanding feels like love.

03

Follow their lead

If they're not ready, don't push. Plant the seed and come back. Presence always matters more than perfect timing.

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Conversation Starters

Use these word-for-word, or make them your own. They are written to work across many kinds of loss — adapt the language to fit your child's specific situation.

When...	Try saying...
Opening the conversation	<i>"I know things have felt hard lately. How are you really doing?"</i>
They say "I'm fine"	<i>"I'm glad. I also want you to know — if you're not fine, that's okay too. I'm here either way."</i>
They go quiet	<i>"You don't have to talk. Can I just sit with you for a bit?"</i>

When...	Try saying...
They seem sad	<i>"It looks like you're carrying something heavy. I'm not going anywhere."</i>
They seem angry	<i>"Your anger makes complete sense. This wasn't fair. What does it feel like for you?"</i>
They feel guilty	<i>"This is not your fault. Nothing you did or didn't do changed what happened."</i>
They're scared	<i>"Feeling scared after something like this is completely normal. What worries you most?"</i>
They want to talk	<i>"Tell me what's on your mind. I'm listening and I'm not going to rush you."</i>
They feel dismissed by others	<i>"I don't care what anyone else says — this is a real loss and your feelings make sense."</i>
Wrapping up	<i>"Thank you for talking with me. I love you. Come find me whenever you're ready for more."</i>

4 What Helps vs. What to Avoid

Well-meaning words can sometimes close the conversation rather than open it. This is true no matter what kind of loss your child is experiencing.

✓ Say This	✗ Avoid This
✓ "It makes sense that you feel that way."	✗ "You'll get over it."
✓ "I don't have all the answers, and that's okay."	✗ "Everything happens for a reason."
✓ "All your feelings are welcome here."	✗ "At least you still have..."
✓ "Tell me more about what you're feeling."	✗ "Try not to think about it."
✓ "I love you and I'm not going anywhere."	✗ "Be strong. Others have it worse."
✓ "You don't have to have answers right now."	✗ "You'll make new friends / find a new pet."

5 While You're Listening — and When They Won't

While You're Listening

- Put your phone down and make eye contact

If They Won't Open Up

- Sit nearby without expectation
- Do something side-by-side: cook, drive, watch TV

- Let silence be okay — don't rush to fill it
 - Nod and reflect back: "So you're feeling..."
 - Ask open questions: "What's that been like for you?"
 - Resist the urge to jump in with advice
 - Say "I hear you" before offering perspective
- Leave a note: "I'm here. No pressure."
 - Try again another time — don't give up after one attempt
 - Let them know you won't be hurt if they're not ready
 - Offer a counselor as a neutral option, without pressure

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Understanding How Children Grieve

Children grieve differently than adults — and differently from each other. There is no single right way, and no predictable timeline. Grief over a friend moving away may resurface months later. Grief over divorce may ebb and flow for years. What looks like "not caring" may be shock or self-protection. What looks like "overreacting" may be the first time a child has felt real loss.

Common Responses to Watch For

- Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities they used to love
- Irritability or anger that seems out of proportion to the moment
- Sleep changes — sleeping too much, or difficulty falling asleep
- Difficulty concentrating at school or forgetting things
- Physical complaints: stomachaches, headaches, or fatigue
- Asking the same questions repeatedly as they try to make sense of what happened
- Swinging between grief and laughter — both are healthy and normal



Good to know: *Grief is not linear. Children may seem fine one day and devastated the next. This is not a sign that something is wrong — it is a sign that they are processing.*

What Grief May Look Like at Different Ages

- Young children (under 8): may not fully understand the permanence of a loss. Look for regression, clinginess, or magical thinking ("If I'm good enough, they'll come back / my parents will get back together").
- Tweens (9–12): becoming more aware of change and loss, may try to appear mature or unaffected while struggling inside. May worry about future losses.
- Teenagers: may turn to peers rather than parents, which is developmentally normal. Watch for complete isolation, risky behavior, or hopelessness.

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Bringing Faith into the Conversation

For families of faith, loss holds a dimension that goes beyond emotion — it can shake a child’s sense of God’s goodness, fairness, or presence. Whether they are grieving a death or a divorce or a shattered dream, children may wonder: Where is God in this? Why did He let this happen? Does He care?

These are honest questions, and they deserve honest, gentle responses. Doubt is not weak faith — it is an honest heart reaching toward God.

Ways to Invite Faith Naturally

- › Pray together out loud, including the hard feelings: “God, we don’t understand this, and we’re hurting.”
- › Read a Psalm together — the Psalms are full of grief, confusion, lament, and hope
- › Let them ask hard questions without rushing to give tidy answers
- › Remind them that Jesus wept (John 11:35) — grief is not faithlessness
- › Share what you believe about God’s presence in hard seasons in age-appropriate language

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”
— Psalm 34:18



Remind them: *Grief is an act of love. We grieve because something mattered to us. That love doesn’t disappear — and neither does God’s.*

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When to Seek More Help

Most children move through loss with time, love, and connection. But sometimes they need more support than a parent can provide alone. That is not failure — it is wisdom. This is true for grief of any kind, including divorce, friendship loss, or other non-death losses that are sometimes minimized.

Consider reaching out to a counselor or professional if your child:

- Expresses hopelessness, or statements like “I wish I wasn’t here” or “No one would miss me”
- Shows a significant change in eating, sleeping, or school performance that persists for several weeks
- Withdraws completely from all relationships and activities for an extended period
- Seems unable to function in daily life after several weeks
- Engages in self-harm or risky behavior
- Appears stuck in guilt, anger, or hopelessness without any movement over time

If you are concerned about your child’s safety or wellbeing, please reach out:

School Counselor • 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) • Crisis Text Line: text HOME to 741741

A Final Word for Parents

You will not do this perfectly. You will say the wrong thing sometimes, and that's okay. What your child will remember is not the perfect words — it's that you showed up, stayed close, and kept the door open. That is enough. That is love. And love is exactly what grief needs most.