

FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

Supporting Your Child Through Grief & Loss

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

Loss comes in many forms. Your child may be grieving the death of a person or a pet, adjusting to the pain of divorce or family separation, or hurting over a close friend moving away. Whatever the loss, the grief is real — and your child needs you to show up for it, even when you're not sure how.

This guide will help you understand what grief looks like in children and teens, how to respond to different kinds of loss, and when to seek additional support.

What Is Grief, and What Kinds of Loss Cause It?

Grief is the emotional response to losing something or someone that matters. It is not limited to death. Any significant loss can produce genuine grief.

Losses that involve death

- Death of a family member or relative
- Death of a close friend or classmate
- Loss of a pet
- Death of a neighbor or community figure

Other significant losses

- Parents divorcing or separating
- A close friend moving away
- A meaningful friendship ending
- Moving to a new school or town
- Serious illness in the family
- Loss of a home, routine, or sense of safety

Remember:

All of these losses are valid. Your child doesn't need to justify their grief or compare it to someone else's. If it matters to them, it matters.

What Feelings Should You Expect?

Your child's grief will be shaped by their age, temperament, and how close they were to what was lost. There is no single "right" way to grieve. All of the following responses are valid.

Emotional responses

- Sadness or deep sorrow
- Shock or disbelief — especially after sudden loss
- Anxiety or fear (about safety, about the future)

Behavioral & physical responses

- Withdrawal from friends or family
- Difficulty concentrating at school
- Changes in sleep patterns or appetite
- Clingy or unusually dependent behavior
- Increased irritability or moodiness
- Wanting to talk about the loss repeatedly

- Guilt (“Why not me?” or “Could I have done something?”)
- Anger — at the situation, at others, or at themselves
- Feeling numb or emotionally flat
- Sudden crying or unexpected emotional outbursts

- Avoiding reminders of what was lost

An important note:

Children who had little direct connection to a loss may still feel deeply affected. Proximity to grief — even secondhand — can trigger fears, questions, and empathy-driven sadness. Don’t minimize what they’re feeling simply because they weren’t close to the situation.

How to Help — Based on the Type of Loss

When Your Child Is Grieving a Death

Whether your child lost someone they loved deeply or someone they knew from a distance, grief after death can feel overwhelming and disorienting. Be patient. There is no timeline for this.

- Create space without pressure:
 - “I’m here whenever you want to talk — or just sit together.”
 - Don’t push them to open up before they’re ready.
- Validate without minimizing:
 - “It makes complete sense that you feel this way. You lost someone who mattered.”
 - Avoid: “At least they didn’t suffer” or “You’ll feel better soon.”
- Use the person’s name. Say it out loud. Let your child hear that this person’s life mattered.
- Help maintain gentle routine while allowing flexibility. Structure supports healing; so does grace.
- Watch for warning signs — see the section below on when to seek help.
- Consider a grief counselor, especially if this is your child’s first major loss.

When Your Child Loses a Pet

For many children, a pet is a best friend, a confidant, and a constant source of unconditional love. Losing a pet can be the first significant death a child experiences — and the grief is genuine and profound.

- Use the pet’s name. Acknowledge specifically what was lost.
- Let them cry and be sad without rushing toward feeling better.
- Invite them to share memories: “What do you want to remember most about [name]?”
- Create a simple memorial if they’d find comfort in it — a photo, a drawing, a special place in the yard.
- Avoid:

- “It was just an animal” — never say this.
- “We can get another one” — this dismisses the specific bond they had.
- Making jokes to lighten the mood too quickly.

Why pet loss hurts so much:

Pets offer unconditional love and reliable companionship. Their loss can leave a child feeling genuinely bereft. Honor it the same way you would any loss.

When Your Family Is Going Through Divorce or Separation

Divorce is a loss of the family life your child has known. Even if both parents remain present and loving, the world has changed for them in a fundamental way. They may grieve this for years, in waves, at different life stages.

- Let them feel what they feel without explaining it away. Their world has genuinely changed.
- Reassure them consistently: “This is not your fault. Both of us love you. That will not change.”
- Keep routines as stable as possible. Predictability is a form of safety during upheaval.
- Listen without putting them in the middle. Never ask them to take sides or carry messages.
- Give them language for complicated emotions: “It makes sense to feel both sad and angry at the same time.”
- Watch for loyalty conflicts — children often feel they have to choose, or feel guilty for loving both parents.
- Consider family counseling or individual therapy for your child, especially during transitions.
- Avoid:
 - Speaking negatively about the other parent in front of your child.
 - “At least we’re not fighting anymore” — this minimizes their grief.
 - Treating your child as an emotional confidant or support system for your own pain.

What they may be carrying:

Children of divorce often feel guilt, confusion, divided loyalty, and grief simultaneously. They may not have words for all of it. Your patient, non-pressuring presence matters more than any explanation.

When a Close Friend Moves Away

Losing a close friendship to distance is a real grief, even when the friend is still alive. For children and teens, close friendships are a primary source of identity, belonging, and joy. This loss deserves to be taken seriously.

- Validate the loss directly: “It makes sense that you’re sad. You’re losing someone who matters to you.”
- Help them create a meaningful send-off — a small gathering, a gift, a letter, or a shared activity.
- Make a realistic plan to stay in touch and help them follow through on it.

- Check in with them after the friend leaves — the grief often hits hardest once the person is actually gone.
- Don't minimize:
 - "You'll make new friends" — even if true, this dismisses the specific friendship they're losing.
 - "You can text anytime" — technology doesn't replace daily, embodied presence.

For your child and for you:

It's okay to acknowledge that this loss is sad — for them and potentially for your family too. Saying so gives your child permission to grieve without having to justify it.

How to Help Your Child Identify and Validate Their Feelings

Children and teens often struggle to name what they're experiencing. Your role isn't to fix the feeling — it's to help them feel less alone in it.

✓ Do say:

- "It makes sense you feel that way."
- "You don't have to explain your feelings."
- "Tell me more about what's going on for you."
- "This is hard. I'm not going anywhere."
- "All of your feelings are okay here."
- "I don't have all the answers — and that's okay."

✗ Avoid saying:

- "You'll be fine — time heals everything."
- "You barely knew them."
- "Try not to think about it."
- "Be strong for your siblings."
- "At least it wasn't worse."
- "Stop being so dramatic."

A Simple Framework to Help Children Name What They're Feeling

Start with the body	"Where do you feel this? Tight chest? Heavy stomach? Hard to breathe?"
Offer options	"Would you say you feel more sad, scared, angry, or something else?"
Normalize it	"A lot of people feel that way after something like this. It makes complete sense."
Just be present	"You don't have to talk. I'm just here."

Warning Signs to Watch For

Most grief responses are painful but normal. The behaviors below go beyond typical grief and suggest your child may need professional support. Trust your instincts — if something feels wrong, act on it.

Seek Help Right Away If Your Child...

- Talks about not wanting to be alive, feeling like a burden, or that “everyone would be better off without me”
- Gives away meaningful possessions or says goodbye in unusual ways
- Harms themselves or talks about wanting to
- Expresses hopelessness about the future on multiple days in a row
- Has panic attacks, flashbacks, or severe anxiety that disrupts daily life
- Cannot sleep or eat for several days in a row
- Uses alcohol, drugs, or other substances to cope
- Becomes completely isolated and unreachable for more than a week
- Shows no emotional response at all — persistent numbness can also signal trauma

→ **What To Do**

- Stay calm and stay with them. Do not leave them alone if they have expressed thoughts of self-harm.
- Contact your school counselor or your child’s doctor and ask for an urgent appointment.
- Call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) — available 24/7 for children, teens, and parents.
- Text HOME to 741741 (Crisis Text Line) — free, confidential text-based crisis support.
- In an emergency, go to the nearest ER or call 911.

You do not need to wait until things are “bad enough.” If something feels wrong, act. Reaching out early is always the right decision.

When to Seek Help — Softer Signs

Even without crisis-level warning signs, these patterns suggest your child could benefit from talking to a counselor or therapist:

- Grief that doesn’t gradually ease after 2–3 weeks
- A significant, lasting drop in school performance or motivation
- Pulling away from all friends and social activities
- Ongoing sleep problems or nightmares beyond the first week
- Persistent anxiety about safety — their own or others’
- This is their first major loss and they seem overwhelmed
- They were very close to the person, pet, or situation that was lost

Early support is not overreacting.

A few sessions with a counselor can make a meaningful difference in how your child moves through grief. Seeking help is an act of love, not a sign that something is catastrophically wrong.

When This Loss Reopens Old Wounds

Grief rarely arrives in isolation. A current loss can unexpectedly stir up pain from the past — for your child and for you as a parent. Understanding this can help your whole family navigate more gently.

For Your Child: When This Triggers Something Older

Your child's reaction may feel more intense than the loss seems to warrant. This is often a sign that current grief has unlocked older, unprocessed pain. Past losses that can resurface include:

- A previous death — a grandparent, a pet, a friend — they may not have fully grieved at the time
- A frightening experience such as an accident, illness, or emergency
- A family loss, divorce, or major disruption that was never fully talked through
- Any experience of loss, rejection, or powerlessness they didn't have words for

What this can look like:

- Grief that seems far more intense or prolonged than expected
- Suddenly wanting to talk about a previous loss
- Heightened fear of losing you or other people they love
- Emotional responses that feel “out of nowhere”

What helps:

Let them lead. If older grief surfaces, welcome it. “It sounds like this is bringing up other things too — do you want to talk about that?” You don't need to untangle it all. Just hold space for whatever comes up.

For You as a Parent: When Your Own Past Gets Stirred Up

Supporting a grieving child while managing your own triggered emotions is one of the hardest things a parent can do. You may find yourself unexpectedly affected by your own grief, fear, or old memories.

- Your own losses — a parent, sibling, friend, or anyone you've mourned
- Fear for your child's safety that feels sudden and intense
- Memories of a past loss or trauma that this situation resembles
- Anxiety, sadness, or emotional flooding that surprises you

This matters for your child:

When parents are flooded with their own unprocessed grief, it can be harder to stay present and regulated. Teens especially are attuned to your emotional state — your anxiety can

amplify theirs. Getting your own support is not selfish. It is one of the most important things you can do for your child right now.

A note on grieving together

It is okay for your child to see that you are affected too. Saying “This is hard for me as well” is not a burden — it is honest, and it gives your child permission to feel their own feelings without protecting you. What’s important is that your grief doesn’t overwhelm theirs. Tend to your own pain so you can be present for theirs.

If You or Your Child Is in Crisis

A school counselor, pastor, or your child’s doctor can help connect you with the right support.

Call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) — available 24/7

Text **HOME to 741741** (Crisis Text Line) — free and confidential