

- Tell the truth. Be simple and direct. Use correct language. Avoid phrases such as: “he went to sleep”, “he passed away”, and “we’ve lost him”.
- Books can be used to help children with grief. Read stories to children that let them to see grief as experienced by the story characters.
- Have more than one conversation. A child’s understanding, interest, and questions about difficult situations change over time. Be there for the child and look for chances to talk more.

Routines and Rituals

- Help the child deal with the change, but keep routines and rituals the same (as much as possible).
- Encourage the child to collect keepsakes and keep their memories.
- It may not always be appropriate for a young child to go to a funeral or memorial service. If the child doesn’t go to the funeral, create a special ceremony to help the child to say “good bye” to the person who died.
- Offer comfort if the child has strong emotions when he remembers family events and routines that included the person who is no longer there. For example, if you bake cookies like those that grandma always made, this may make him very sad.

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

health information

Helping the Young Child Cope with Grief and Loss

This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.



Very young children understand death or the loss of someone important only by how it affects them. Their day-to-day activities and routines have changed. If the person who died was a parent or an adult who always looked after them, they may feel a loss of attention and feel less secure. They may also feel that the adults around them aren't able to give them the emotional support and comfort they need.

Infants and Toddlers: Before Age 3

Very young children have little understanding of the cause or finality of death. They react to separation from a person that was important to them and to the changes in their immediate world. Their distress at the changes in their environment after a death or loss are shown by:

- crying
- searching for the person who is no longer there
- changes in their sleeping and eating habits

Pre-schoolers and Young Children: Ages 3–5

Pre-schoolers may think they caused the death. They may think of death as punishment. The child at this age is full of questions and misunderstandings. Even though a child may have seen

someone buried they may think the person will be cold and hungry. To them death is reversible—being dead means being still and being alive means moving.

Children this age may be sad, angry, scared, or worried. They may communicate these feelings through:

- tantrums, fighting
- crying
- clinging
- going back to earlier behaviours (such as nightmares, bedwetting, thumb sucking)
- separation fears
- sharing their thoughts that the person will magically reappear
- acting and talking as if the person is still alive

How can I help a young child cope with grief?

You can help a young child to cope with grief through helping him with his feelings, his understanding of death, and by keeping his daily routines and rituals the same (as much as possible).

Feelings

- Help the child to understand the person is not coming back, and to talk about how this makes him feel. He may feel sad, mad, or lonely.

- Pay attention to the child's feelings. Not paying attention to the child's feelings can lead to physical and emotional problems.
- Allow and encourage the child to express his feelings (e.g., drawing pictures).
- If a parent is pre-occupied with her own grief, be sure the child has someone consistent to go to. A grieving infant or toddler needs lots of tender, loving care—holding and cuddling.
- Don't hide emotions. However, keep strong, dramatic feelings for private times with other adults.
- Help the child share his feelings. This will help to decrease the hurt. Children may wish for things to be the way they used to be.
- Recognize and accept the way children express their grief. Let them know that it's okay to express how they feel.

Understanding

- Encourage the child to talk about the person who died and how much they are missed. Encourage questions. Find out what a child thinks and feels and correct any misunderstandings.
- Let them know they are not to blame.