

Together in Caring:  
Supporting Mental  
Wellness in  
Home Child Care

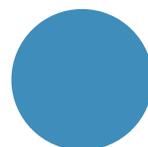
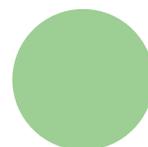


# Grief and Loss

A Resource Guide for Parents &  
Home Child Care Providers



Child Care Providers  
RESOURCE NETWORK



# About CCPRN:

Child Care Providers Resource Network is a non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to providing training, support, and information to individuals providing care in their homes—including home child care providers, parents, and grandparents. CCPRN celebrates 40 years as a successful organization with a network reach of over 4500 providers and parents. Please visit [www.ccprn.com](http://www.ccprn.com) for more information.

Have a question? Contact us at [childcare@ccprn.com](mailto:childcare@ccprn.com).



Want to help? Donate now at [www.ccprn.com/donate](http://www.ccprn.com/donate).

When you donate to CCPRN, you are securing a future where home child care providers are able to access the tools and support they need to provide quality care.

A special thank you to the Ottawa Community Foundation for supporting this project:

*The Ottawa Community Foundation is a public, non-profit organization created by and for the people of Ottawa. It connects donors who care with causes that matter and serves as a trusted resource for addressing issues and leveraging opportunities in the community. It attracts and manages a growing endowment, the invested earnings of which provide grants to charitable organizations.*

*The Foundation's role is as neutral broker in support of all charitable causes that contribute to the community's quality of life. With a growing profile, the Ottawa Community Foundation has built an enviable reputation for astute financial management, high-quality donor services, strategic grantmaking and innovative partnerships. For more information, visit [www.ocf-fco.ca](http://www.ocf-fco.ca).*

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# Introduction

Grief is a normal and natural response to change or loss. Feelings of grief may be caused by a traumatic event (death, illness, or disaster), a major life change (divorce, moving), experiences of discrimination, or in anticipation of a loss. While experiences of grief and loss are universal, how each person manifests and responds to those experiences is unique.

Understanding more about how young children express their grief and learning about available resources can help you to better support them through challenging situations.



Sometimes grief can be overwhelming. Please seek additional help if you are concerned about your child's grief. If you are concerned about a child in your care, talk about it with the family and work together to support the child.

# A Note About COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered so many feelings of loss and grief--for adults and for children too.

Whether families are dealing with the illness or death of a loved one, struggling with the loss of income or job security, coping with community devastation, and/or managing prolonged social isolation, we know that it has been an emotional rollercoaster. For those working on the front lines in health care, even more so. There's no doubt, the pandemic has taken a toll, leaving us feeling vulnerable and exhausted.

In addition to (or alongside) feelings of loss and grief, you might also be noticing that the little ones in your care are feeling more anxious and that the transition to child care is taking much longer.

For more information on supporting children as they start (or resume) daycare, please refer to *Transitioning to Child Care: A Resource Guide for Parents and Home Child Care Providers*. For information on supporting children who worry, take a look at *Anxiety: A Resource Guide for Home Child Care*. Both are available as free downloads on our website at [www.ccprn.com/resources](http://www.ccprn.com/resources).



# How Do Children Grieve?

## Common Reactions and Ways of Offering Support

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<https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group>. While this section is geared towards helping a child cope with death, many of the common reactions and ways of offering support also apply to children experiencing other types of loss.



### **How do babies and toddlers (0 to 2 years) grieve?**

Babies and toddlers don't understand the concept of death. They can respond to a change in their environment. They will experience feelings of loss, abandonment and insecurity if a significant person is missing. They don't have the language to express how they are feeling and will pick up on the distress that is around them.

It is common for extended family or friends to offer to look after children following bereavements. Babies, toddlers and young children benefit from staying as close as possible to their usual caregivers.



## **Common reactions**

- increased crying and irritability
- being clingy - needing to be held more
- looking for the person who has died
- being anxious around strangers
- possible withdrawal - less interest in play or food (possible weight loss)
- regression in previously reached milestones

## **Ways to support**

- hold and cuddle more - keep them close
- keep to routines if possible
- be calm around them and speak calmly to them
- provide comforters, favourite teddies or blankets etc.



## **How do preschoolers (3 to 4 years) grieve?**

Preschoolers find it hard to understand that death is permanent. They often develop an interest in the death of birds and animals and are developing an understanding that being dead is different from being alive. This age group has rich 'magical thinking' where they may think the person can become alive again or that they did something to make the person die.

Preschoolers have a very literal understanding and think in a very concrete way. It is important to use real words such as 'dead'. Euphemisms such as 'lost' or 'passed away' may cause misunderstanding and confusion. Preschoolers can feel insecure and frightened when things change. They will need lots of reassurance that they will be kept safe and be looked after.

### **Common reactions**

- crying more, clinging and being fearful
- looking or calling out for the person who has died
- tantrums, being irritable or stubborn
- withdrawal or showing a lack of response
- changes in eating or sleeping habits, less ability to play
- temporary regression (such as bedwetting, returning to crawling, wanting a bottle)
- having a sense of the presence of the person who has died



## Ways to support

- provide information (you can do this over time) and honest answers to questions
- keep routines
- talk about who is looking after them and keeping them safe
- support them with touch – hugs, encouragement, holding their hand etc.
- keep close to familiar adults (you may notice anxiety even when being left with familiar adults)
- honestly explain death as a part of life using what they can see (use plants or insects as examples of death in nature)
- read children's books together about death and grief
- use words that describe feelings
- encourage creative play and exercise as an outlet for thoughts and feelings
- include them in doing something for the funeral (such as drawing a picture to put in the casket or on the service sheet)
- create a memory box together



## **How do school-aged children (5 to 12 years) grieve?**

School-aged children gradually begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and irreversible. Some children may still think that death is temporary or that the person who has died will feel things and be cold, lonely or hungry.

Children increasingly become aware that death is an inevitable part of life and can become anxious about their own health and safety. They may be concerned that someone else they love may die. Children may be interested in what has happened to the person after they have died, where they are now. They may ask blunt questions about what has happened to the person's body. It is important to answer questions honestly and provide enough information so that children are not left with gaps in their knowledge. The risk of not enough information is that a child may fill this space with inaccurate information.

Children's imagination and 'magical thinking' can mean a child may feel that their thoughts, words or actions caused a death. They may feel guilty. Continuing to answer questions and explain death to this age group is important. Their understanding will be developed over time and they may need to revisit what has happened and ask the same questions many times to make sense of their experience. Ongoing reassurance, love and affection is helpful.



## Common reactions



- blaming themselves for the person's death
- looking for or sensing the person's presence
- being distracted and forgetful
- having increased anxiety for their safety and the safety of people they care about
- not wanting to be separated from caregivers
- not wanting to go to school
- having physical complaints (such as tummy pain, headaches)
- may try to suppress their emotions to protect the adults around them
- withdrawal from usual activities
- being quiet or not showing a response to the death
- feeling strong emotional reactions such as anger, guilt or a sense of rejection
- behavioural issues (such as aggression, tantrums, defiance, getting into trouble at school)



- may try to please adults and take on adult responsibilities
- change in eating and sleeping habits
- temporary regression
- embarrassment around being different

## Ways to support

- reassure your child that they are safe and say who is looking after them (they may want to know who will look after them if you die)
- keep routine and normal boundaries around expected behaviour
- tell them that you see they are sad (or angry, etc.), use words to describe feelings
- keep separation from loved adults and caregivers to a minimum
- make time to listen to their thoughts and questions and answer honestly
- talk about death being a part of life, observe changes in nature and read books about death and dying together
- include them in planning for a funeral and talk about whether they would like to do something as part of the honouring of the person who has died
- make a memory box, scrap book, photo album together
- encourage play - this is a natural form of communication and an opportunity to process what has happened
- encourage exercise



# When a Pet Dies

One of the first and most common grief experiences for young children is the death of a pet--whether a beloved family pet or a special pet at a caregiver's home.

Just as with the death of a person, and depending on their age and development, every child will react differently to the death of a pet. Be patient and reassuring as you talk to children in a way that is age-appropriate and sensitive.

You can support children by:

- Keeping to the facts (use your discretion regarding the details) and using words that are direct and honest but not scary (avoid euphemisms such as "put to sleep", "gone to a better place", "lost" or "crossed the bridge").
- Answering their questions as best you can--if you don't know an answer, just say so.
- Encouraging them to share their feelings, whether sad, mad, scared, etc.
- Sharing your sadness and/or your own personal pet loss story.
- Offering comfort--be close and be present.
- Reading together--picture books can help children to process their feelings.
- Celebrating the pet's life with a special gesture--take a favourite walk, draw a portrait of the pet, plant a flower or tree, paint a memorial rock, blow a wish, sing a song, etc.



# A Note About Divorce and Separation

It is natural and normal for children to experience and express a range of emotions (including grief and loss) when their family separates or their parents divorce. Even very young children will be affected by this type of major life change. Often, the home child care provider is the one to offer a consistent presence and a sense of stability--especially during the initial transition, while parents are working out the details of their separation. By maintaining the usual child care routine, understanding the ways in which children express grief, and responding with sensitivity to the child's needs, caregivers can help support young children through this type of challenge.

Here are some great online articles and resources to help you support a family going through a separation or divorce:

- [https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/mentalhealth/separation\\_and\\_divorce](https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/mentalhealth/separation_and_divorce)
- <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2406-divorce-with-an-under-3-in-the-house-what-you-need-to-know>
- <https://www.teachearlyyears.com/a-unique-child/view/coping-with-divorce>
- <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pdf/complet/divorce-and-separation>
- <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pdf/synthese/divorce-and-separation>
- <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/divorce-and-separation#how-minimize-impact-divorce-and-separation-children>

# Talking About Death:

Children are naturally curious about life and death. Turn everyday moments into an opportunity to talk about the life cycle. Observing plants and insects often provides a natural segue to talking about death. Understanding the inevitability and irreversibility of death takes time. As children grow and develop they begin to process and accept these concepts. Introducing the language and simple facts can help to prepare children for the death of a pet or loved one down the road.

When a child in your care experiences the death of a pet or loved one, be sure to talk openly with the family. Find out what the child knows. Similarly, if your home daycare experiences the death of a daycare pet or if you the caregiver experiences the death of a loved one, be sure to communicate this news with your daycare families. Talk about what information to share with the children so that communication is consistent.

- Use simple language and truthful explanations: "He died.", "She was very sick/old and her body stopped working.", "They're dead. They can't eat or breath or talk anymore.", "She died. Died means she's not coming back. We won't see her again.", "We can still think about him and remember the special times we had together.". Avoid euphemisms such as "sleeping", "gone to a better place", and "passed" or "passed through the gates".



- Model and build empathy. Express your own feelings ("I'm sad too. I'll miss feeding Finn and watching him swim around.") and give children the opportunity to express theirs. Help them to build empathy when a friend is grieving ("She's sad. Her Grandpa died and she misses him. What can we do or say to tell her that we care?").
- "I wish..., I miss..., and I remember..." are good starting off prompts. Some children will join in and want to share while others might prefer to listen as you share your thoughts and feelings.
- Wonder together. Some questions have no answers. It's ok to say that you don't know the answer but that you're glad that you can wonder about it together.
- Respond with care and kindness and reassure children that they are safe, cared for, and loved.
- Encourage children to play. This is how they work out difficult situations and make meaning of events they don't quite understand.
- Invite the children to do something special as a way to honour and remember a pet or person who has died.
- Know that each child will process their grief in their own way and in their own time.
- Some children will be quite matter of fact about a death and that's ok too.



## Ideas to Honour and Celebrate Life:



- plant a tree, bush, flower, or garden
- draw a picture of the pet or person or of something that they liked/liked to do
- paint a stone and place it in the garden, at a park, or somewhere significant to the pet or person
- make a wish on a handful of wildflower seeds (or use a dandelion seed head or dried milkweed pod) blow your wish and the seeds into the wind
- write a note on seed paper, plant your note someplace special
- blow bubbles as you talk about the person or pet
- do something that the person or pet loved to do--sing, play a game, go for a walk, etc.
- make a memory box filled with special photos and other mementos
- ask your child/children for ideas that are meaningful to them

# Book Suggestions



Picture books that talk about death, grief, and loss.

\*Be sure to check for suitability by reading through books on your own first.

- Lifetimes by Bryan Mellonie
- When Dinosaurs Die by Laurie Krasny Brown
- Tear Soup by Pat Schwiebert
- The Heart and The Bottle by Oliver Jeffers
- The Dead Bird by Margaret Wise Brown
- Where Are You? A Child's Book About Loss by Laura Olivieri
- The Invisible String by Patrice Karst
- I Miss You: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas
- Grandma's Purple Flowers by Adjoa J. Burrowes
- Water Bugs & Dragonflies by Doris Stickney
- A Stone for Sasha by Aaron Becker
- The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr



Ask your local librarian for other great recommendations.

# Other Recommended Book Lists:

"Books are powerful tools that can help children make sense of difficult feelings. Explore this reading list for infants and toddlers to help them navigate complex feelings and experiences, including anger, fear, grief and loss, and divorce."

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/7-books-about-feelings-for-babies-and-toddlers>



## **Zero to Three: Grief and Loss Reading List**

- <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/7-books-about-feelings-for-babies-and-toddlers#chapter-7>

## **Zero to Three: Divorce Reading List**

- <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/7-books-about-feelings-for-babies-and-toddlers#chapter-8>



## **Scholastic Books: 7 Touching Books to Help Kids Understand Death and Grief**

- <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/7-touching-books-to-help-kids-understand-death-and-grief.html>

# Recommended Resources

## Websites:

<https://www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com>

A group of organizations in Halton, Peel, and Toronto that collaborate to increase awareness of the needs of grieving children and youth. The mission of the Children and Youth Grief Network is to advocate for educational opportunities and support services that will benefit children and youth who are grieving the dying or the death of someone they care about. The CYGN has produced a series of short videos for supporting grieving students:

<https://www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com/videos/>

- » Introduction to How to Support Grieving Students
- » How to Recognize Children's Grief
- » How to Support Grieving Children
- » Four Common Concerns of Grieving Children and Youth
- » What to Say, What Not to Say

<https://www.ementalhealth.ca>

Created by CHEO psychiatrist Dr. Michael Cheng, this website provides anonymous, confidential and trustworthy information and is dedicated to improving the mental health of children, youth and families.

<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/Canada/Helping-Children-and-Youth-With-Grief-Bereavement-and-Loss-Information-for-Parents-and-Caregivers/index.php?m=article&ID=13275>

## Websites:

[www.childmind.org](http://www.childmind.org)

The U.S.-based Child Mind Institute publishes many articles about parenting challenges including several under the category of Trauma and Grief.



<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>

<https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief/>

<https://childrengrieve.org/>

The National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG) is a nonprofit organization that raises awareness about the needs of children and teens who are grieving a death and provides education and resources for anyone who supports them. Through the collective voice of our members and partners, we educate, advocate and raise awareness about childhood bereavement.

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>

The Sesame Street in Communities website has practical resources for families experiencing grief, including an e-book for children, a caregiver guide, and a series of "caring cards".



## Online Articles:

- <https://connectability.ca/2020/08/20/childrens-grief-and-loss/>
- <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-children-process-grief-and-loss-through-play>
- <https://www.notimeforflashcards.com/2017/11/young-children-and-grief-what-preschool-teachers-need-to-know.html>

## Online Learning:

[KidsGrief.ca](https://kidsgrief.ca) is a free online resource that helps parents support their children when someone in their life is dying or has died. It equips parents with the words and confidence needed to help children grieve life's losses in healthy ways. Access the learning modules for parents and educators here:

<https://kidsgrief.ca/mod/lesson/view.php?id=151>

## Videos to Watch Together:



Sesame Street Talk, Listen, Connect: When Families Grieve

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2VpflpbOmk>

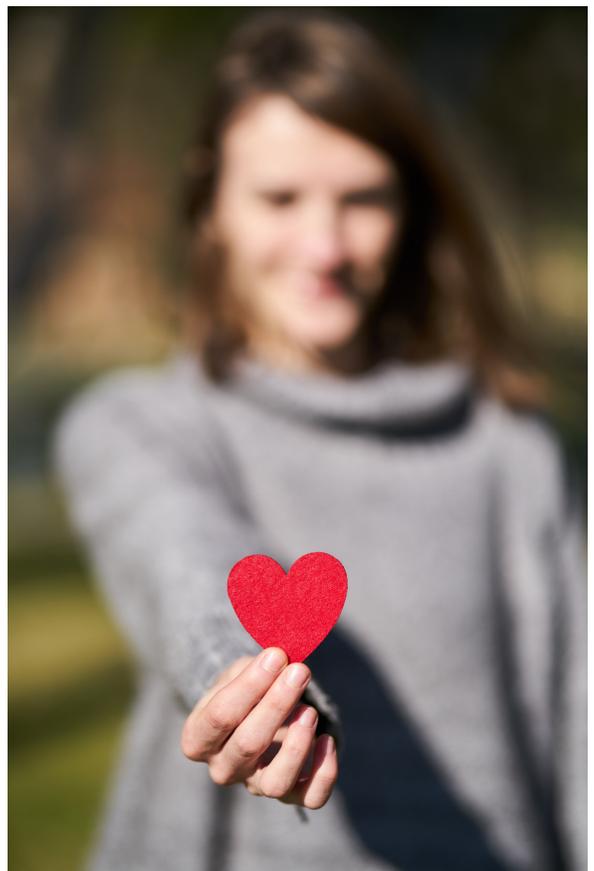
Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood: Daniel's Fish Dies

<https://gem.cbc.ca/media/daniel-tigers-neighbourhood/s03e12>

# Together in Caring

While we might hope that the young children in our care are spared from feelings of grief--it's important to realize that many children experience loss, whether due to a death, divorce, or another major life change. Being prepared to provide a supportive and empathetic response will help children to understand and cope with their feelings.

Being present, giving children the time and space to work through their emotions, wondering together about the hard questions, and bearing witness to their pain will all help to validate their grief.





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