

How to Support a Child When Someone Dies

Simple, actionable ideas for parents, carers and the professionals who support them

It can be hard to know how to help a child when someone dies. This guide shares ideas to help you support a child through loss and bereavement, whether you are their parent or carer, or you work with them in school or another setting.

Some pages are designed to be printed, copied and shared. Please use them however helps.

Cherry-pick the ideas that you think might work and give them a go. You can always come back to the others later if you need to.

If you are grieving too, these ideas may help you as well, and doing some of them alongside the child can help you both.

You are not alone if you feel lost about how to help. Very few of us are taught this. Trust yourself, go gently, and start with whatever feels possible.

Pooky x

Say it Simply

There is a lot of adult language around death and dying that is meant to protect, but often confuses. Children, especially younger children and those who think in concrete, literal ways, need to hear the truth plainly so they can understand it and begin to make sense of it.

Telling a child that someone has “gone to sleep” or “passed away” can be frightening or baffling. A child might worry about going to sleep themselves, or wait for the person to come back from wherever they have “gone”. Many neurodivergent children take language at face value, so a euphemism does not soften the news, it just makes it harder to follow.

Whilst plain words can feel harsh at first, straight talking also shows a child that death is not a topic to be scared of, and that it is okay to ask questions and talk about it.

More helpful, and less helpful

More helpful: X has died. X is dead. X is dying.

Less helpful: Passed on. Gone away. Gone to sleep. Resting in peace. Lost.

Make their World Predictable

The death of someone they love can make a child's world feel scary, unpredictable and out of control. We can help by making as much as possible feel predictable and consistent.

Familiar faces, places and routines bring comfort, and can feel deeply reassuring when so much else has changed. Predictability is not boring, it is a lifeline, and never more so than now.

When someone dies, a lot tends to change at once. Look for what can stay the same and say so clearly, because a child will not always assume it. Telling them "we will still have pizza on Fridays" or "I will still pick you up at the same time" gives them something solid to hold on to. Where new routines are needed, try to settle them quickly so the ground feels firm again.

This matters for every child, and it matters even more for neurodivergent children, who often rely on predictability to feel safe and may find sudden change especially hard.

Validate All Feelings

Many children are naturally good at processing big feelings around death, often better than adults, who have been taught to grieve in the ways society tells us are right.

Notice the range of feelings a child moves through, and let them know all of it is welcome. It is normal and healthy not to feel sad all the time. A child may swing quickly between feelings, laughing one minute and crying the next, and that is fine.

All feelings are valid, and children should not learn from us that only sadness is allowed now. Taking a break from grief matters too. It is a good sign when we can reach a point of remembering the person with a smile as well as with tears.

Grief does not always look like grief, especially in children. It can show up as anger, clinginess, silliness, withdrawal, trouble sleeping, or difficult behaviour. For neurodivergent children, big feelings often come out as dysregulation or meltdown, or fold inward into shutdown, rather than arriving as neat, nameable emotions. A child who masks may hold themselves together all day and fall apart only when they are somewhere safe. None of this is misbehaviour. It is grief, looking for a way out. When we see it this way, we respond with support rather than correction.

Exploring Feelings about Death

When a child is ready to look at their feelings, it helps to have a few different ways in, because what works for one child on one day will not work for another. You do not need to do all of these. Offer one, see how it goes, and come back to the others another time. Most of these work just as well for you as for the child, so you can do them alongside each other.

Notice and name the feelings. Sit together and try to put words to what is there right now, without judging any of it. You might say "I am feeling a bit sad and a bit tired today, what about you?" Naming a feeling out loud often takes some of its sting away, and it shows a child that all feelings are allowed.

Draw how you feel. Give the child paper and pens and suggest they draw their feelings rather than a picture of something. It might be scribbles, colours or shapes, and that is fine. The

point is not a nice drawing, it is letting the feeling out through their hands when words are hard to find.

Write whatever comes. For a child who likes words, suggest they write without stopping to think, whatever lands on the page. No one else needs to read it. Getting the swirl of thoughts out of their head and onto paper can bring real relief.

Make a feelings playlist. Find a few songs together that sound how the child feels, sad ones, angry ones, calm ones. Listening to music that matches a feeling can help a child feel understood, and making the playlist gives you something gentle to do side by side.

Talk to a person or a pet. Sometimes it is easier to say things out loud to a pet, an older sibling or a trusted adult than to hold them in. Let the child know who they can talk to, and that talking to the dog counts just as much.

Sing. Singing changes how the body feels and can lift a heavy mood, even for a minute. Put on a favourite song and sing along together, loudly if it helps.

Imagine a favourite character. Ask the child how a character they love would feel in their shoes right now, and what that character might do. Coming at big feelings sideways, through someone else, can make them easier to look at.

Try a journal prompt. Offer a simple sentence starter to get going: I am... I feel... I hope... I wish... Let them finish each one however they like. There are more prompts to choose from in the next section.

Accept Anger

Anger is one feeling a child may feel strongly, and one we sometimes wish away. We need to acknowledge it and help a child accept it, because anger that is pushed down for fear of being “naughty” or inappropriate does not disappear.

Anger needs to be heard. Otherwise it tends to turn to poison that either hurts a child inside, or spills out at times they cannot control and hurts others.

Words that might help

“I feel angry too. It is very hard, and it feels very unfair right now.”

“It is okay to be angry. Would you like to talk, draw or write about it?”

Pick-Me-Up Prompt

When a child is trying to get back to normal daily activities like school, expect that now and then the feelings will catch up with them and they will feel overwhelmed.

Plan ahead for this together. Think with the child about what would help in that moment, and make a small crib sheet or prompt card they can carry or share with a trusted adult. For a child who finds it hard to ask for help out loud, or to find words when they are overwhelmed, something they can simply hand over can be a real relief.

It is worth thinking about sensory overwhelm too. Grief is tiring, and a tired, sad child often has far less capacity for noise, crowds and busy spaces than usual. A quiet place to go and a few minutes out can make the difference between coping and tipping over.

Key questions to consider together

- What helps?
- What is unhelpful?
- Who needs to know?

Generate Joy

Joy and laughter give important respite from harder feelings, and children sometimes feel they are not allowed to be happy after someone has died.

Help a child understand that every kind of feeling is allowed. Think together about the small moments in the day or week that bring a bit of happiness, and look for ways to have more of them.

Notice the happy moments, encourage them, and join in where you can. A child can be happy and still be remembering the person who died. It is also completely okay to take a break from thinking about them for a while and enjoy something else entirely.

Cathartic Crying

It is okay to laugh and it is okay to cry. “Being strong” often gets praised at times like these, but sometimes we do not feel strong, we just want to cry and cry, and that is okay too. A good cry is a natural, healthy way of working through some of the big feelings that come when someone dies.

If you are grieving alongside the child, it is okay to cry with them. Seeing a trusted adult cry, and seeing that they are alright afterwards, shows a child that this is a normal human response and gives them permission to cry too. You can talk about how crying helps, snuggle up with tears and tissues together, and let tears come when they need to, perhaps while looking at photos or playing songs that remind you of the person.

If you are supporting a child in a professional role and are not bereaved yourself, you do not need to manufacture tears or hide your feelings. A calm, warm presence and a few honest words, something like “this is so sad, isn’t it”, tells a child their tears are welcome here, and that you can handle their feelings alongside them.

Working with Worries

When someone dies, children often carry a lot of worries. One of the 4Ss may help.

- **Share it.** Talk, write or draw about your worries. Get them out of your head and into the world.
- **Shelf it.** If now is not a good time for a worry, shelf it for later and make an appointment with it.
- **Shout it.** Sometimes we need to run, jump, shout or scream to get rid of the fizzing, bubbling worry feelings.
- **Shed it.** Some worries are not yours to carry. Pass adult worries on to an adult to worry about. That is their job.

What Was Left Unsaid?

There are often things we want to tell the person who has died, but it feels too late. They might be things we had been meaning to say while they were alive, or new things we would love to share with them now.

These things are better said than unsaid, so it can help a child to write or talk to the person who has died and imagine the reply they need. You might do this alongside them.

As long as it does not get in the way of connecting with the living, it is okay to keep talking to someone long after they have died. It can bring real comfort, and often helps a child work through their worries and questions.

You could

- Write them a letter
- Talk to their picture
- Play a song they liked and imagine them talking to you

Journal Prompts: Grief and Memories

A gentle word first. Choose the prompts that suit the child and the situation. Some touch on harder ground, and if a death was sudden, frightening or traumatic, a prompt like writing about the day they died may be too much too soon, or best saved for a time when a trained professional can support it. Follow the child's lead, and feel free to use these yourself too.

There is no right or wrong way to use these. Some children find prompts helpful, some do not, and that is fine either way. Some like to write their answer, some would rather type it, record a voice note, or make a video. They work just as well as discussion starters, talked through rather than written down. It is about whatever suits the child. You do not need to work through them in order either. Pick one that feels right for the day, and do not be surprised if a child wants to come back to the same one more than once.

Happy memories and the person they were

- Write about a happy memory of your time together
- Write about a time you laughed together
- Write about the advice they used to give you
- Make a list of ten things you both loved
- Write a list of five things that annoyed you both
- Draw or write about their hands

Letters and messages

- Write a letter to them with the things you wish you had said
- Write a kind letter to you, from them
- Write down something you never got to tell them
- Write about what you would want them to know about you now
- Write them a message about something good that has happened
- Write down a question you wish you could ask them

Carrying them with you

- Write about something of theirs you would like to keep
- Write about a way you are alike
- Write about something they taught you that you still do
- Write about how you might remember them on a special day
- Write about what they would be proud of you for
- Write down a saying or story of theirs you want to keep alive

Harder feelings and the loss itself

- Write about the day they died and how you found out
- Write about what you miss most right now
- Write about the hardest time of day without them
- Write about a worry you have been carrying
- Write about something you wish people understood
- Write about what would help you feel even a little bit better

Sentence starters to finish

- What I most miss about X is...
- If X was here, they would tell me...
- I always think of X when...
- The thing I want people to know is...
- Something that made me smile today was...
- When I miss X, it helps to...

Keep and Make Memories: the Memory Jar

A memory jar is a simple, lovely way to gather small memories of someone and keep them somewhere a child can return to. On a hard day, they can pull out a note and remember something good. It is an activity you can do once and add to over time, and it works for any age.

What you need: a jar, box or tin, some small pieces of paper, and a pen. Decorating the jar together can be part of the activity if the child enjoys that.

How to make it: sit together and write down memories of the person who died, one to a slip of paper, then fold them and drop them in. You can write your own alongside the child's, which often gets the memories flowing and shows them that the grown-ups remember too. Keep the jar somewhere easy to reach, and add to it whenever a new memory surfaces, because they often arrive at unexpected moments.

If the child likes the idea but is not sure where to start, these prompts give them somewhere to begin. Write each one on its own slip and finish the sentence:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We laughed when...• We cried when...• Our favourite film was... because...• Our favourite song was... because...• A place we loved to go... | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our favourite food...• First memory of you...• Last memory of you...• We got angry when...• We loved it when... |
|---|---|

Other ways to keep and make memories, if a jar is not quite right: make a scrapbook, fill a box with mementos, voice record yourselves telling stories about the person, or paint memories onto pebbles and place them somewhere special.

Looking After Yourself

Supporting a grieving child asks a lot of the adult doing it. You might be holding a great deal of feeling, theirs and perhaps your own, and that is heavy to carry.

If you are a parent or carer, you may be grieving the same person. Please give yourself the same permission you are giving the child: to feel everything, to rest, to not have the answers. You do not have to hold it all together for their sake. A child gains more from a human, imperfect adult who muddles through honestly than from one who seems fine but is quietly running on empty.

If you are a professional, the weight is real for you too, even though you are not bereaved. Absorbing a child's grief day after day takes something out of you, and it is easy to carry it home without noticing. You are allowed to find it hard. Make space to set it down, whether that is a proper break, a conversation with a colleague, or your own supervision or support. Looking after yourself is not taking anything away from the child. It is what lets you keep showing up for them.

Exhausted is not the same as not coping.

Be kind to yourself.

When to Seek More Support

Grief is a natural process, and most children, given time, space and support from the adults around them, will work through it without needing specialist help.

Sometimes, though, more support is the right call. It is worth reaching out if a child seems stuck in their grief over a long period with no easing, if they are talking about not wanting to be here, if they are withdrawing from almost everything, if school or daily life becomes very hard for a long stretch, or if you simply feel out of your depth. None of that means you have done anything wrong. It means this child needs more hands around them, and seeking that out is a good and caring thing to do.

Organisations that can help

- **Winston's Wish** (winstonswish.org) supports grieving children and young people, with a freephone helpline for families and professionals.
- **Child Bereavement UK** (childbereavementuk.org) supports bereaved families and the people working with them, with a helpline and resources.
- **Hope Again** (hopeagain.org.uk) is Cruse Bereavement Support's service for young people, a good fit for older children who want somewhere of their own.
- **Grief Encounter** (griefencounter.org.uk) offers free bereavement support for children and young people.

If you work in a school, do loop in your designated safeguarding lead or pastoral lead. A bereavement sometimes brings wider needs to light, and they can help make sure the right support is in place.