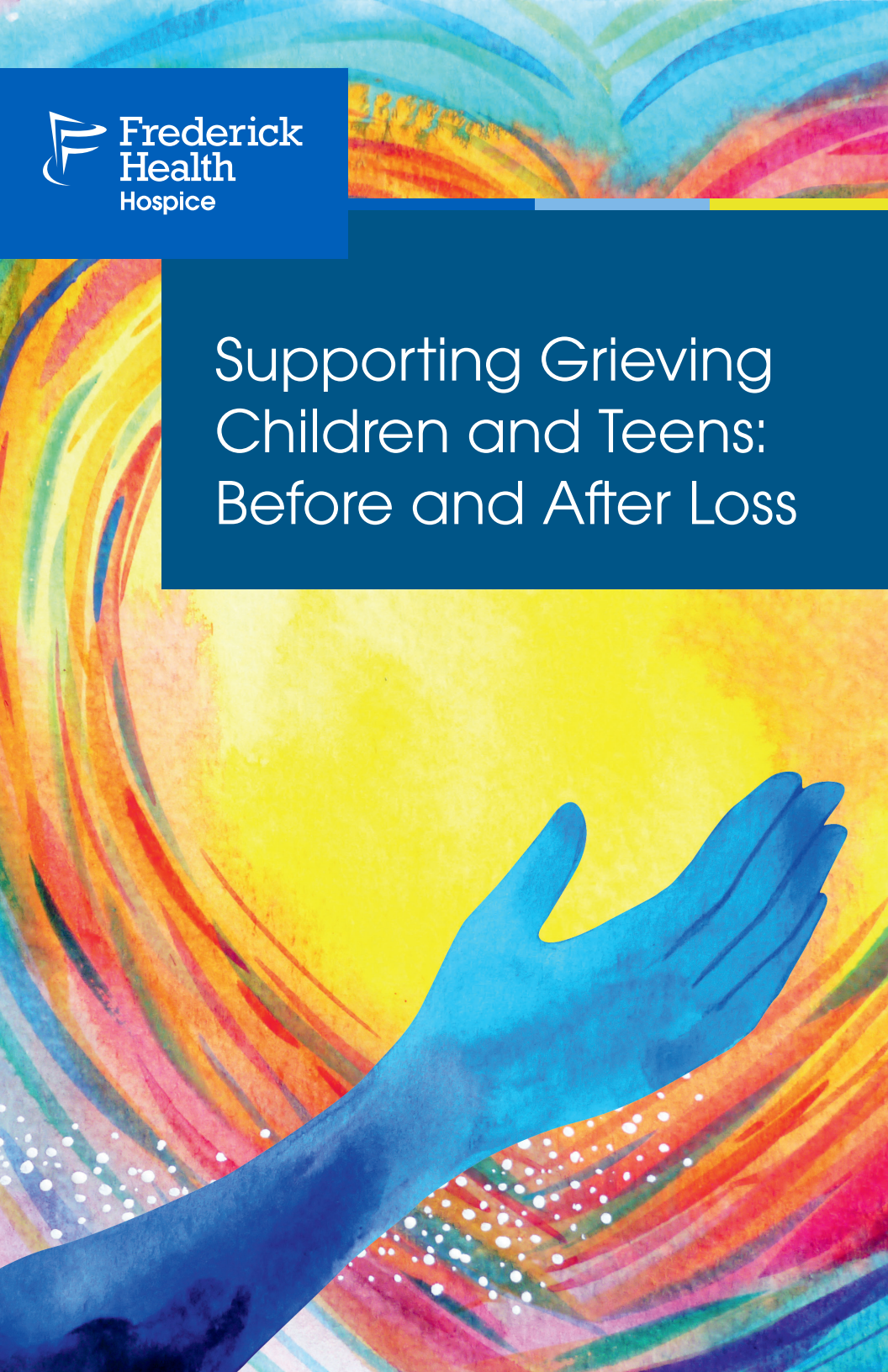




Supporting Grieving Children and Teens: Before and After Loss

"Anyone old enough to love
is old enough to grieve."

-Dr. Alan Wolfelt

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An Introduction from the Frederick Health Hospice Team

Talking with kids and teens about death and dying is one of the most difficult things most of us will ever do – especially if we are tasked with being the one to break terrible news to a child or teen, and especially if we too are grieving. We hope that this resource will serve as a guide and support to you as you begin to navigate these challenging conversations.

Please know that the Frederick Health Hospice Team is here to support you in any way we can, whether that means providing consultation or even being present and helping to facilitate these conversations with your child. Hospice social workers are available upon admission to hospice to help support the entire family, including children and teens with anticipatory grief. Hospice grief counselors offer one-on-one grief counseling, support groups, and grief camps for children and teens after the death of a loved one, including anyone who did not use hospice services. Please call **240-566-3030**, email griefsupport@frederick.health or visit www.FrederickHealthHospice.org for more information.

Preparing Children/Teens for the Death of Someone Close to Them

Adults want to protect children and teens from emotional pain and suffering. This natural urge can be difficult to balance with the desire to be honest and upfront about harsh realities, such as talking about death and dying. While there is no “right time” to tell children and teens about a loved one’s terminal illness that works for every family, there is one certainty: people of all ages benefit from being prepared **in advance** for the death of someone close to them.

Talk to Children/Teens in Advance

Telling children and teens in advance about the potential death of a family member or friend is beneficial because it:

- Fosters an environment of open and honest communication.
- Enables children and teens to get factual information from caregivers.
- Leaves less opportunity for children and teens to imagine different or inaccurate explanations.
- Helps children and teens make sense of the physical changes they see happening to a person who is unwell.
- Creates an opportunity for the ill person to play a role in preparing children and teens for the possibility of their death.
- Allows time to put additional support systems in place, such as school counselors, therapists, and grief programs, where available.
- Enables children and teens to grieve with the adults in their lives, instead of alone and from the sidelines. Caregivers can help children and teens understand that their emotions and those of others around them are healthy and natural.
- Gives children and teens the chance, when the death of a loved one is imminent, to say goodbye in a way that feels appropriate for them or to just be with the person with a shared knowledge that their time together (at least physically) is limited.
- Enhances the trust between children and teens and their primary caregivers.

Helpful Strategies for the Conversation

For most families, the “right time” to talk to a child or teen about the anticipated death of a loved one will always be hard to determine. It rarely feels “right” to share such information, especially in the case of a dying parent or sibling. The task is always difficult emotionally and often feels opposite to what adults think they should do. However, setting aside time for this specific purpose is important. Some of the following strategies can be helpful guidelines:

- **Ask children and teens to describe what they already know about the situation.** Many caregivers are surprised to learn that some children and teens have already considered the likelihood of the loved one dying.
- **Reassure children and teens that talking about the likelihood of death does not increase the chances of the death occurring.** Children and teens often engage in “magical thinking.” This can make them feel responsible for good and bad outcomes, despite not actually having any control over them. Providing children and teens with facts and concrete explanations can help them focus on things that are actually within their control (such as how to spend time with their family member). Knowing what to expect can help them let go of things beyond their control (such as worrying about when the person will die).
- **Ask children and teens how much information they want.** Do they want a lot of information or just the most important information? Some individuals need more information than others and benefit from being told about the prognosis as soon as possible. It’s also important to let them know that they can change their minds later on if they would like more or less information.
- **Create an environment where children and teens feel safe asking questions.** Adults can invite children and teens to ask any questions they have about the illness, even the hard questions. They may ask:

“Could Dad die from his cancer?” It’s important to answer such questions honestly. Keep in mind that it is okay to answer with “I don’t know” if you do not have the answer to their question – it can even be a relief for children and teens to hear that adults may not have all the answers to their questions. Adults can provide reassurance that even though they do not have all the answers, it is still important to talk and wonder about these hard things together.

- **Recognize that it’s unnecessary to hold off telling children and teens until “all of the medical information” is obtained.** Many families think they shouldn’t talk until they have more information (more test results, a more accurate prognosis), but children and teens can appreciate being a part of the experience of uncertainty with the adults in their life.
- **Ask the physician directly for an estimation as to how long the person will live.** If the death may be imminent, it’s important to share that information with children and teens right away.

While there is the possibility of children and teens discovering a loved one’s illness “too late,” there is not really a chance of them learning what is happening “too early.” Some families are open with each other about the likelihood of death even from the time of diagnosis. This is an approach that works well for many children and teens. Telling the truth from the beginning sets the stage for an openness that needs to be there throughout the illness and afterward.

Many families are pleasantly surprised to find that children and teens tend to resume their regular activities and interests quite quickly after learning a parent or sibling may die. Children and teens process information very differently than adults, and may go back and forth between wanting and processing new information, and engaging in daily activities and fun. As well, parents often feel greatly relieved once everything is out in the open, as they no longer need to spend energy on trying to control the flow of information.



An important note: knowing someone will die and actually experiencing the death can be two very different things.

Children and teens may still be shocked or surprised when a family member dies, even if they've been well prepared beforehand. This is not a failing on the part of whoever shared the information, but rather a reflection of how children and teens process information and their limited understanding of death. Please refer to the other sections of this booklet for information on how to talk to children and teens about death and loss.

Tell Children/Teens What to Expect

Knowing what to expect helps to ease the fear of the unknown. Children and teens also may have to adjust certain behaviors because of the physical limitations of the person with the illness.

You might want to share information about any of these topics:

- Treatments.
- Where the person will be cared for (home, hospital, other environments).
- Side effects that might occur as a result of medications or procedures. For example, you might let the child/teen know that the person with the illness may be more tired than usual, may look different, or may not be able to participate in activities.
- Symptoms of illness. For example, if the person with the illness has back pain, the child/teen should be aware that sitting on the adult's knees may not be possible.
- What they might observe as their loved one's illness progresses. Telling children and teens that their loved one's appearance might change, that they may lose weight, and that they may become more tired and spend more time sleeping, can all be pieces of helpful information in preparing a child or teen for what they might observe.



Prepare Children/Teens for Any New Environments

Describing the healthcare environment in advance of a visit helps children and teens make sense of what they will see. Imagine yourself as a child: what will you see and notice as you walk into a room? If the patient is using any medical equipment (such as oxygen, a ventilator, or an IV line), describe what the equipment looks like and explain its purpose.

Discuss Changes to Children/Teens' Routine

Children and teens may be very concerned about who will look after them, and how someone's illness may affect their usual routines. This happens especially when the person with the illness is a parent or primary caregiver. Try to clarify who will be looking after them, where they will be cared for, and what changes might occur in their day-to-day routines. If you can, continue to maintain a regular schedule, as structure is important. Most of all, give the child/teen plenty of affection and reassurance that they are still loved very much and will be cared for.

Speaking to More Than One Child/Teen

If there are several children/teens in the family, you may want to bring them together for discussions. However, there may be times when you want to set aside some time to talk to each of them individually. If you have children and teens who are particularly sensitive, you may find you have better discussions when they can explore their feelings without their siblings present. You will likely have a sense of what will work best in your situation.

Check-in frequently

Check-in with children and teens frequently by asking them if they have any questions about what is happening or want to talk about how they are feeling. This will let them know that they can talk to you about their feelings. Exploring why they have these feelings can



also be helpful. You may also want to discuss how you're feeling and that's okay. Children and teens will recognize that the situation is sad, and it can be helpful for them to know that adults are experiencing the same emotions that they are.

It's also good to let children and teens know that it's okay if they don't want to talk. Simply letting them know that you are available if and when they are ready to share, and then allowing them space can be very powerful. It is worth noting too, that some young people may fear upsetting other family members, so offering the support of someone outside of the immediate family unit – such as an uncle or aunt, pastor or rabbi, or close family friend – can provide a young person with plenty of options for sharing about their experience.

Do Not Withhold Information

Most children and teens can sense when adults are withholding information, which can cause them to imagine alternate scenarios – some of which might be more disturbing to them than what is actually happening.

When information is withheld, children and teens may learn about an impending death only by overhearing conversations not intended for their ears. Or they may hear it from people outside the immediate family. Children and teens really benefit from learning of such news directly from their parents or guardians before hearing it from others. It can be difficult, or even impossible, to control the flow of information outside the family. Therefore, the sooner family members open up conversations about dying with their kids, the less likely kids are to learn such upsetting news elsewhere.

There is a trust issue as well. If children or teens discover that their parents or guardians knew about a loved one's impending death but intentionally didn't tell them, they may have difficulty trusting their caregivers in the future. This creates additional challenges in the children's grief process.

Allowing Children/Teens the Opportunity to Say, "Goodbye"



Although it may be difficult, it is important to allow children and teens the opportunity to say goodbye to their dying loved one. As with anything else in the grief and loss process, it is essential to give children and teens a choice of how they want to say goodbye or even if they want to say goodbye at all.

First and foremost, the child or teen should be prepared for what they are going to see, including any medical equipment and physical changes in the dying person such as a lack of eating and drinking or difficulty breathing. Additionally, the child or teen should know that the dying person may not be responsive or may be very tired and not up to a long visit. However, there are still ways for the child or teen to interact with the dying person. Even if the person no longer responds to their visitors, the child or teen can still talk to the person and perhaps tell them about their day at school or recall happy memories of the dying loved one. The child or teen may also just simply wish to sit next to the dying patient and read or draw.

The child or teen will undoubtedly have questions; make sure the child or teen knows they are free to ask about anything they are curious about or don't understand. Even if you don't know the answer to the child/teen's question, it is okay to tell them you don't know and offer to find out the information together.

Again, it is also okay if the child or teen does not wish to visit or does not wish to say goodbye in the same way that you do. Allowing the child or teen to have choices can help them manage the grieving process later on.

Saying goodbye to a dying person is less about the "saying goodbye event" or final visit, and more about helping the child or teen to make final memories with the person they love, and letting them know that their feelings are valid and important.

How to Answer Common Questions Children and Teens Ask About Death and Dying

What does it mean to be dead?

“All living things die. Living things (people, plants, and animals) eat, breathe, and grow. Like all living things, people eventually die. When people die, they stop breathing, eating, and growing.”

Why do people die?

“People die for many reasons. Sometimes people grow old, and their bodies stop working. Some people are involved in bad accidents, and some people develop diseases and illnesses. When this happens, their bodies shut down and stop working.

It seems so unfair when someone we love dies. Everyone will lose someone that they love at some time in their lives. Death happens to everyone, and everyone is loved by someone. It helps to know that we are not alone.”

What is death like?

“When someone dies, they don’t come back to life. It is not like sleeping or resting. Their bodies never work again. Death is forever.”

Does it hurt to die?

“Death is usually not painful. When someone is old, dying is almost always quiet. When someone dies in an accident, they often feel no pain because death comes so quickly. Even for people that are very sick, doctors can prescribe medications that usually help relieve the pain.”

Why do I have so many mixed-up feelings?

“It is natural to have mixed-up feelings when someone you love dies. You may feel sad, lonely, guilty, confused, angry, glad, etc. Everyone has some of these different feelings. It is natural to feel pain. It hurts very much but as time goes by it begins to hurt less. Your feelings are normal; don’t be afraid of them. Talking about them can really help.”

Is it my fault that the person died?

“It is not your fault, their fault, or God’s fault. A person dies when their bodies stop working. It has nothing to do with anything you may have said, felt, done, or not have done.”

Where do people go when they die?

(If this fits with your faith/belief system)

This may be a good place to open the conversation and explore what your child thinks happens when someone dies by asking, “Where do you think people go when they die?”

There are many answers to this question. Here is just one possibility:

“Many people believe that when someone dies, a part of that person lives on and goes to Heaven or an afterlife. The part of us that lives on is the part that lets us feel our feelings. It is called our spirit or our soul. Our spirit/soul never dies. We cannot see someone’s spirit/soul, nor can we see Heaven/afterlife, but we have faith in them. To have faith is to believe in something we cannot see. Others believe that when a person dies, they are reincarnated or reborn to continue living on as another being. What do you think?”

Will I ever again see the person who has died?

“You’re probably really missing the person who has died. It’s really hard to miss someone so much. You may always miss them, but you won’t always feel this sad. Someday, a long, long time from now, you may be with that person in Heaven/afterlife.

Even after someone dies, there are ways we can continue to feel close to them. Having photos of them around, visiting their grave, listening to songs they liked, eating their favorite food, sharing memories, or keeping/creating significant objects are all ways we can keep a person close.”

How to Support a Grieving Child/Teen After Death

Answer the Questions They Ask—Even the Hard Ones

Kids and teens learn by asking questions. When they ask questions about a death, it's usually a sign that they're curious about something they don't understand. As an adult, a couple of the most important things you can do is to **let them know that all questions are okay to ask**, and to answer questions truthfully. As adults, we often have the instinct to protect children and may think that withholding information that we think might be upsetting or painful is best. However, withholding information can actually be more harmful to a child or teen in the long run.

Be sensitive to their age and the language they use, and take their cues as to how to answer. No child or teen wants to hear a clinical, adult-sounding answer to their question, but they don't want to be lied to either. By listening to the words they use, we can get insight into what information they are really seeking, and the best way to provide them with that information.

As a rule, **less is often best**: by letting the child or teen lead the conversation, and answering their questions directly and honestly, but answering only what is being asked, we can lessen the risk of sharing information that the child might not yet be ready to process.

Often the hardest time to be direct is right after a death. When a child or teen asks what happened, use concrete words such as “died” or “killed” instead of vague terms like “passed away.” A young child who hears his mother say, “Dad passed away” or “I lost my husband,” may be expecting that his father will return or simply needs to be found.

Give Choices Whenever Possible

Children and teens appreciate having choices as much as adults do. Choice can be especially important during this time because there is so much that feels out of control and overwhelming. Even being able to make small choices can help a child feel more secure and like they have some control over what's happening.

Having choices helps children and teens say goodbye and grieve in the way that is right for them. Try as much as possible to provide options, as well as plenty of reassurance that there is no “wrong” choice. Providing simple explanations of what the different choices will look like can help children and teens more easily choose what feels right for them. Let them know that whatever they're feeling is okay.

Sometimes children and teens in the same family will choose differently. For example, one child may want pictures and memorabilia of the person who died, while another may feel uncomfortable with too many reminders around. If you are a parent, ask your child or teen what feels right to them. Don't assume that what holds true for one child/teen—or yourself—will be the same for another.

Talk About and Remember the Person Who Died

Remembering the person who died is part of the healing process. One way to remember is simply to talk about the person who died. It's good to use his/her name and to share what you remember. You might say, “Your dad really liked this song,” or “Your mom made the best apple pie.”

Bringing up the name of the person who died is one way to give the child/teen permission to share their feelings and memories about the deceased. It reminds them that it is not “taboo” to talk about the deceased. Sharing a memory has a similar effect. It also reminds them that the person who died will continue to “live on” and impact the lives of those left behind. If a child/teen feels that they cannot talk about their loved one, it can have a significant impact on their grief experience and their ability to heal. Encourage them to talk about their loved one in whatever ways feel right to them.



Many children and teens also like to have keepsakes of the person who died, such as objects which hold an emotional or relational significance. For example, after her father died, Laura, 11, wanted to keep several of his favorite t-shirts, and often wears them as nightgowns. With her mother's help, Laura also made a collage of photographs of her and her dad and has it hanging on her bedroom wall. Jacob, 7, has a teddy bear that some thoughtful family friends made for him using one of his father's flannel shirts. When Jacob feels sad, he likes to hug the bear and says it makes him feel like "Daddy is hugging me back."

Respect Differences in Grieving Styles

Children and teens often grieve differently from their parents and siblings. Some children and teens want to talk about what's happening, while others want to be left alone. Some like to stay busy, and others withdraw from all activities and stay home. Younger children may be clingy, whereas teens may prefer to spend time on their own or with peers.

One of the activities the grief counselors at Frederick Health Hospice often do with grieving families is mask-making. Each person decorates a mask—the outside represents what they show to other people, while the inside represents what they're really feeling inside. People are often very surprised to discover what their family members are truly feeling! By talking about grief and sharing feelings, families can help each other heal and reduce the hurt and confusion that can sometimes come when loved ones are grieving in very different ways from each other.

Recognizing that each person grieves in their own way is essential to the healing process for a family. Listen to children and teens talk about their feelings and watch their behavior, and you will help clarify and affirm these natural differences.

Listen Without Judgment



One of the most helpful and healing things an adult can do for a child or teen is to listen to their experiences without jumping to judge, evaluate, or fix. Well-meaning adults often try to comfort a child or teen with phrases such as, "I know just how you feel," or advice such as "get over it" or "move on." While the intentions to soothe a hurting child are correct, using such responses negates the child's own experiences and feelings, and may discourage them from sharing.

If a child or teen says something like, "I miss my Dad," try to simply reflect back what you've heard, using their words, so they know that they're being heard (e.g. "I know you really miss your dad. That must be so hard.>"). Use open-ended questions such as "Can you tell me about that?" or "What has this been like for you?" Children and teens are more likely to share their feelings without pressure to respond in a certain way. This is just one way we can validate their experiences and emotions, helping them regain a sense of safety, balance, and control.

Perhaps, most simply, it's okay to just *be* with the child or teen, letting them cry, or sitting with them quietly. For many children and teens, knowing that they have someone who cares about them and is there for them—and is not going anywhere—might be the most important thing we can do.

Take a Break

Children and teens grieve in cycles. For example, they may be more inclined to play and divert their focus from the death when the death is recent and parents or caregivers are grieving intensely. Immediately after learning that his mother died, Caleb, age 9, asked if he could go play video games. While his father was shocked and wondered if Caleb understood what he was being told, the grief counselor who was there explained to his dad that Caleb just needed some time to process what had happened. Later on, Caleb returned and asked another question about his mother's death, and then he went back to playing video games.



Behavior like Caleb's is very common throughout the grief process. More than adults, children and teens need time to take a break from grief. It is important to know that it's okay to take a break. Having fun or laughing is not disrespectful to the person who died; this is a vital part of grieving, too, and is well within the realm of normal behavior for grieving children and teens.

Support for Children/Teens During Funerals

Navigating the subject of a funeral can be stressful and filled with worry for the adults in children's and teens' lives. Many adults tend to either exclude children and teens from funerals or force them to attend. Both of these are not nearly as helpful as one may think. Providing an open discussion, offering honest information and giving the child or teen the choice to participate enables them to see how valued and important the person was to others and to know that grieving the loss is okay.

Adults might worry that the funeral could be traumatizing to children/teens if they attend, or worry they'll feel regret if they do not attend. Discussing the service ahead of time can help you come up with developmentally appropriate ways to support your child or teen.

Exploring their direct or non-direct participation is a great way to find the right fit. Either way we encourage you to allow the child or teen in your life to decide for themselves.

First, explain the process, viewing, funeral, burial, your family's traditions and beliefs. Explain what will happen, what they will see, hear, smell etc.

If your family chooses to have a viewing, here is a list of details you could provide when explaining a viewing to a child/teen:

- Your loved one is placed in a special box, called a casket.
- The viewing is a time for people to come and say goodbye.
- People walk up, if they choose, to view their loved one.
- Sometimes people put pictures, notes, or items in the casket.



If your family chooses **cremation**, be prepared to answer questions the child or teen might have about this process. Keep the information general and brief. If they have questions, they will ask you to clarify or explain further. Here are some ideas on how to explain this to a child/teen:

- The person's body is placed in a special room where a process is used to turn the person's body into soft ash. This does not hurt the person.
- Then this soft ash is placed into a special container, called an urn.
- Sometimes the urn is placed in a particular spot for the family to go visit
- Sometimes the family chooses to keep the urn at their house.

After you fully explain what the experience will be like, leave space for them to ask questions. Then give them the choice to attend or not, this gives them the sense of control.

Further tips regarding Funeral Service:

- Leave the option open for children or teens to change their mind at any time about attending or not attending the service.
- Have a back-up plan ready and assign a point person for them to help support them during the service.
- A point person takes the stress off everyone and allows you and the child or teen to process your feelings the way you need to.
- Come up with a code word they can say if they are feeling too uncomfortable and need a break, but do not have the words to express this.
- Make sure they know you will not be upset if they change their mind or need to leave once they are already there.

The funeral is one of the first times they will have to express their grief. They learn by watching the adults in their life. Be open, honest and do not be afraid to share your thoughts and feelings even if they are not always happy. It is an important part of a child's/teen's experience to see others grieving. It sends a message and they learn by watching their role models.

Other Ways for Children/Teens to Say Goodbye After Death

If your child or teen chooses to not attend the service, explore indirect ways they can say goodbye. They can draw a picture, write a note, or make a small craft. Let them tell you what they want and assure them that one particular person (if not you) will make sure that item is placed or displayed in a way that satisfies their desire. Make sure they know these things will not be returned if it goes in the casket.

Create a place to visit their loved one. Some suggestions:

- Have the child/teen in your life write a special memory or message on a small slip of paper.
- Brainstorm with them to find a special place that reminds them of their loved one. Like a pond, or park, in the back yard, or a place they used to go to with their loved one.
- Take the slip of paper and help them bury it under a tree or near a rock at this special place (keeping in mind finding a spot that can be easily marked and found again).
- Create a special place at home, outside, paint a memorial rock, plant a special plan/flower, and make it a tradition every year.



Developmental Responses to Grief

While everyone grieves differently, there are some behaviors and emotions commonly expressed by children depending on their developmental level.

Ages 2 to 4 Years Old

Developmental stage

Children this age do not fully understand that death is permanent and universal. They are most likely to express themselves through their behavior and play.

Concept of death

Young children see death as reversible and are starting to wonder if death happens to everyone. You might hear questions like: “My mom died? When will she be home?” and “Will you die too? What about me?”

Common responses to grief

- General anxiety
- Crying
- Irregular sleep
- Clinginess/need to be held
- Irritability
- Temper tantrums
- Telling the story to anyone, including strangers
- Repetitive questions
- Behavior regression: may need help with tasks they’ve already learned

Ways to help

- Create a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability, especially around starting and ending the day.
- Provide short, honest explanation of the death. “Mommy died. Her body stopped working.” Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, or lost.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- Provide opportunities for play.
- Give choices whenever possible. “Do you want a Pop-Tart or cold cereal?”
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.

Ages 5 to 8 Years Old

Developmental stage

Children this age are exploring their independence and trying tasks on their own. They are very concrete thinkers, with a tendency toward magical/fantasy thoughts.

Concept of death

In this age range, children often still see death as reversible. They can also feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die. They may say things like: “It’s my fault. I was mad and wished she’d die.”

Common responses to grief

- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits
- Repetitive questions: “How?” “Why?” “Who else?”
- Concerns about safety and abandonment
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Nightmares

- Regressive behaviors: or may need help with tasks they've already learned (can't tie shoes, bedwetting)
- Behavior changes: high/low energy, kicking/hitting
- Physical complaints: stomachaches, headaches, body pain

Ways to help

- Explain the death honestly using concrete language. "Daddy's heart stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, or lost.
- Be prepared for, and patient with, repetitive questions.
- Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play.
- Allow children to talk about the experience and ask questions.
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.
- Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or tomorrow morning?"

Ages 8 to 12 Years Old

Developmental stage

Children in this age group may still be concrete thinkers, but are beginning to understand abstract ideas like death and grief. They often start making closer connections with friends and activities outside their home and family.

Concept of death

Children this age begin to understand that death is permanent and start thinking about how the loss will affect them over the long-term. Some children will focus on the details of what happened to the body of the person who died. Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that their thoughts and actions made the death happen. They may say or think things like: "If I had done my chores, my mom wouldn't have died." or "I think it was my fault my brother died because I was mean to him."

Common responses to grief

- Express big energy through behavior sometimes seen as acting out
- Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others—"The world is no longer safe"
- Worries about something bad happening again
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Physical complaints: headaches, stomachaches, body pain
- Using play and talk to recreate the event
- Detailed questions about death and dying
- Wide range of emotions: rage, revenge, guilt, sadness, relief, and worry
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, light, movement, and change
- Withdrawal from social situations

Ways to help

- Inform yourself about what happened. Answer questions clearly and accurately. Even though children this age are starting to grasp abstract thought, it's still helpful to use the words dead and died and avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost, or expired.
- Provide a variety of activities for expression: talk, art, physical activity, play, writing, music.
- Help children identify people and activities that help them feel safe and supported.
- Maintain routines and limits, but be flexible when needed.
- Give children choices whenever possible, "Would you rather set the table or put away the dishes after we eat?"
- Work to re-establish safety and predictability in daily life.
- Model expressing emotions and taking care of yourself.

- Be a good listener. Avoid giving advice (unless they ask for it), analyzing, or dismissing their experiences.
- After the death of a parent, avoid reinforcing the idea that children must step into a more adult role.
- Talk with teachers about providing extra support and flexibility with assignments.
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

Ages 13 to 18 Years Old

Developmental stage

Teens are cognitively able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death. They begin to see themselves as unique individuals, separate from their role in the family, and may wrestle with identity and who they want to be in the world. There can be significant changes in their priorities, spirituality/faith, sexuality, and physical appearance. Teens often rely on peers and others outside the family for support.

Concept of death

While teens understand death is permanent, they may have unspoken magical thoughts of the person being on a long trip, etc. They may also delve into questions about the meaning of life, death, and other traumatic events.

Common responses to grief

- Withdrawal from family or other support networks/focused on connections with peers
- Increased risk-taking: drugs/alcohol, unsafe behaviors, reckless driving
- Inability to concentrate (school difficulties)/pushing themselves to succeed and be perfect
- Difficulty sleeping, exhaustion

- Lack of appetite/eating too much
- Unpredictable and at times intense emotional reactions: anger, sadness, guilt, relief, anxiety
- Uncomfortable discussing the death or their experiences with parents and caregivers
- Worry about safety of self and others
- Fear about death or violence happening again
- Confusion over role identity in the family
- Attempts to take on caregiving/parent role with younger siblings and other adults
- May have thoughts of suicide and self-harm
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, movement, light

Ways to help

- Reinforce assurances of safety and security, even if teens don't express concerns.
- Maintain routines and set clear expectations, but be flexible when needed.
- Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix, or take them away.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Provide choices whenever possible. "I'd like to do something to honor your dad's birthday, would you like to be part of that? What ideas do you have?"
- Adjust expectations for concentration and task completion when necessary.
- After the death of a parent, avoid reinforcing the idea that teens must step into a more adult role.
- Assist teens to connect with support systems, including other adults (family, family friends, teachers, coaches).

- Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of yourself.
- Ask open-ended questions ("What is it like for you?") and listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or minimizing.
- Have patience with teens' wide range of reactions and questions.
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

Previous section adapted from the book 35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child created by The Dougy Center. To order a copy of the book, visit [Dougy.org](https://www.dougy.org) or call 503-775-5683.



Frequently Asked Questions from Parents/ Caregivers Raising Bereaved Children/Teens

How do I tell my child or teen that someone has died?

Telling a child or teen that someone they love has died ranks among the most difficult tasks a parent/guardian will encounter. There is no one-size-fits-all in terms of what to say, but there are a few general principles that may help. The explanation you offer your children/teens will vary depending on the circumstances of the family member's death; was there an acute or long-term illness, or did the death occur suddenly and without warning?

In either case, it is important to talk to your children/teens as soon as possible after the death. Start simply and honestly, and preferably in person, by saying something like, "I have some sad news to share with you. Today, your dad was in a car accident. The ambulance took him to the hospital, but he was hurt too badly, and he died." First and foremost, be honest and avoid any temptation to alter the truth. If there are questions you can't answer, say, "I don't know, but I can try to find out."

You may want to wait and see what questions your children/teens have before giving more information than they can handle at one time. It's also helpful to reassure them that, "this is hard, but we will get through it together."

Should my child/teen attend and/or participate in the funeral?

While it is natural to want to protect children/teens from the painful reality of death, end-of-life rituals are vital to a child's or teen's understanding of death and a key component of grief and mourning. Funerals are communal events, which we have been performing since the beginning of time, across continents and cultures. Allowing children/teens the option to attend and participate in these significant end-of-life rituals is important.

Start by telling them what it will look like. Walk them through what they will see, who might come, what people might say, and how people

might feel. Children/teens are wonderfully inquisitive, and they will be curious at the funeral.

Answer questions honestly and confess when you don't know the answer. Many parents find it helpful to have a point person during the funeral. Identify someone you and your child/teen trust to be available if your child/teen wants to take a break or stop participating in the ritual.

Give kids the facts they need, normalize the experience, and let them know their choices. If they decide they do not want to participate, that's okay too. Just be sure they are making the decision with unbiased facts.

What reactions might I expect to see with my grieving child/teen?

Your child/teen will grieve in their own unique way. How they grieve will depend on many different factors, including their age, their stage of cognitive development, cultural influences, their relationship with the deceased, and most importantly, how you are grieving.

Young children up to age 6 are subject to the kind of illogical or magical thinking typical of that developmental stage. They are also egocentric and may think that somehow, they caused the death of their loved one. In addition, young children don't understand that death is irreversible and they may be waiting for their loved one to return. Young children need reassurance, comfort, and patience on your part as you respond to their questions.

School-aged children understand that death is permanent but still struggle to make sense of what happened. Respond to their questions with truthful, direct language and know that they are old enough to hear the answer if they've asked the question. Children of this age may lack the ability to verbalize their feelings and may behave in ways that cause additional challenges. Children may have trouble tolerating strong emotions that are triggered by reminders of the deceased and will need to learn



ways to cope with those feelings and thoughts. Parents and caregivers can provide reassurance, and bereavement support programs can provide opportunities for children to connect with others who are also coping with a death in the family.

Adolescents are also egocentric and struggle with guilt and regret when a loved one dies. They may attempt to cope with their grief in ways that can be impulsive or even unhealthy. In addition to keeping the lines of communication open with their teens, parents and caregivers can promote supportive relationships. Participation in grief support programs with similarly bereaved teens is also beneficial. Families can encourage teens to continue to pursue the goals they had before the death, including leaving home for college or work after high school graduation.

How can I help my child/teen transition back to school? When should they go back to school?

Going back to school after a death in the family can be an emotional experience for children/teens, as well as parents and caregivers. Although there isn't a "right" time to go back to school, it is important to promote a return to routine activities and structure.

Caregivers should consider the child's/teen's level of comfort with being separated from supportive adults, and may want to have children/teens attend half days or join their peers at school for lunch breaks to help ease the transition.

It is important to let school personnel know about the death and share what has been helpful to the child/teen.

The impact of a family death on a child's/teen's academic functioning can be unpredictable. Grief reactions can intensify at any time—including during a math test. In some situations, grief can influence a child's or teen's ability to make decisions and impair memory and concentration, resulting in a decline in school performance.



There can also be symptoms similar to ADHD, including disorganization, distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity.

Grieving students are likely to benefit from additional social, emotional, and learning supports. Parents and caregivers may want to request that school personnel consider making additional accommodations for their children/teens, such as opportunities for breaks or time with a counselor during the day, reduced workload or assignment extensions, assistance with organization and time management, or tutoring when needed. Families can advocate for their children and teens by sharing the resources they have found helpful with school personnel.

How do I parent a grieving child/teen?

The experience of grief can be difficult for any child/teen to comprehend, and sharing their feelings can be a challenge. After a death, children/teens are often left feeling frightened, angry, sad, or confused. They may lack the ability to express themselves, or reach out for help, in a clear or mature way.

Often when a child/teen misbehaves, they are trying to communicate a need for help, or a strong feeling, and simply lack the vocabulary and skills needed. Adults may see negative or "acting out" behavior as intentional, but sometimes it is just a reflection of the child's or teen's limitations and desire for support.

While no loss experience should excuse antisocial or dangerous behavior, it is important to not miss the messages in the child's or teen's actions.

Set clear limits for the negative behavior and focus on safety being absolute, while also offering healthier ways for the child/teen to express themselves.

Be confident, but not overly critical, when commenting on misbehavior.

When a child/teen doesn't want to talk, parents and caregivers can still model healthy self-expression by sharing their own feelings.

When we help children/teens find healthy ways to share their feelings and needs, negative behaviors are less likely to occur.

Will my child/teen be okay?

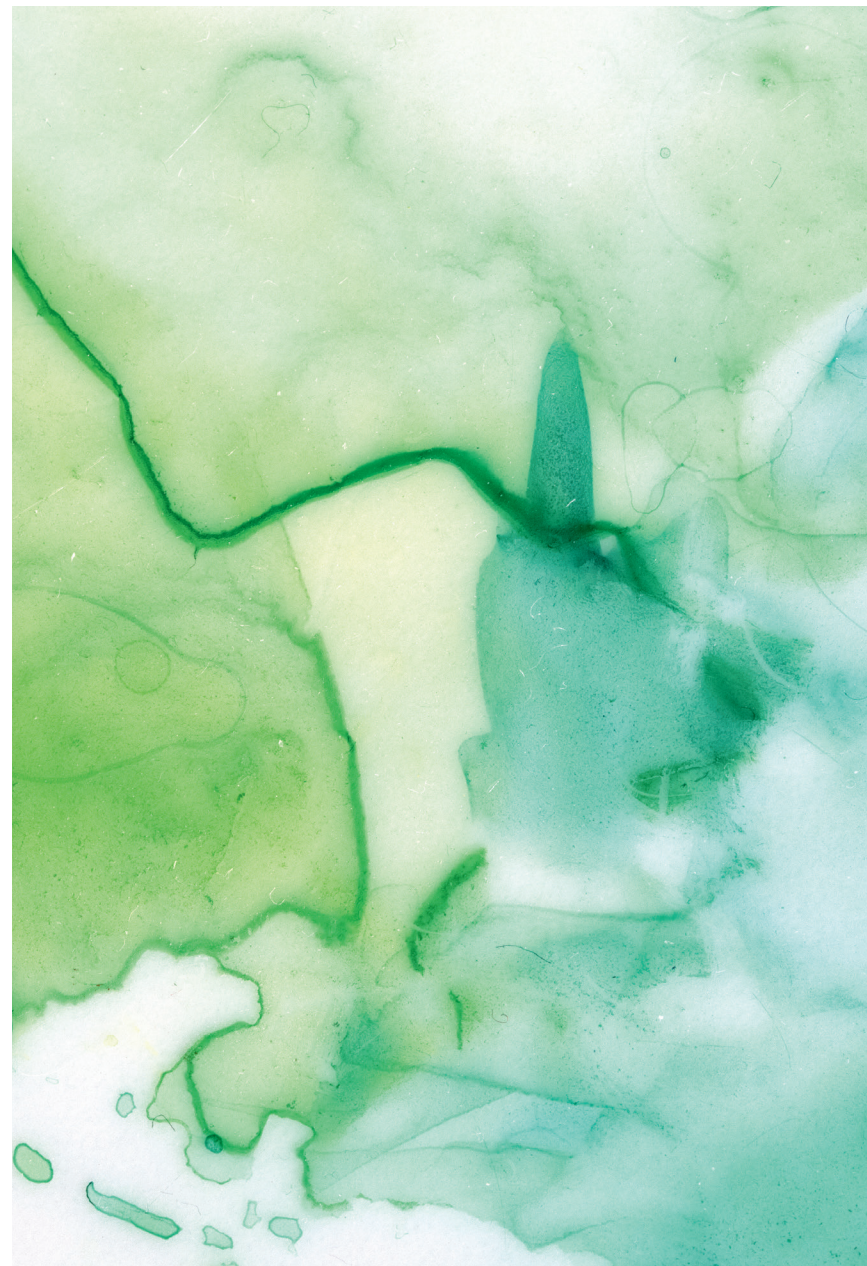
After the death of a loved one, parents and caregivers are often concerned about their children's or teen's ability to cope. It is also natural to see changes in children's or teen's behaviors after a death, including signs of sadness, anger, and fear, and while the field of childhood grief is still learning about how children/teens function after a death, current research indicates that bereaved youth usually go on to lead healthy and productive lives.

Nevertheless, it is helpful to be aware of signs that can tell us when a child/teen may be in need of more formalized, professional support. Some behaviors that might indicate the need for further support include:

1. Inability to keep up with daily tasks, such as regularly attending school, completing homework, personal hygiene
2. Significant, ongoing signs of extreme sadness, sobbing, or social withdrawal
3. Risky, harmful behaviors (drug use, reckless driving, stealing, promiscuity)
4. Inability to acknowledge the death, or appearing numb or totally disconnected from the reality of the death
5. Persistent fantasies about ending their life in order to be reunited with the deceased person in an afterlife

It is also important for parents and caregivers to trust their instincts about whether their child/teen is struggling excessively to cope in the aftermath of a death – trusted adults are often the true “experts” when it comes to observing uncharacteristic behavioral changes in a child/teen.

Previous section is from the National Alliance for Grieving Children.



Moving Forward: “Firsts and Special Events”

Just like with adults, “firsts” after the death of a loved one can be challenging and anxiety-provoking for children/teens. Whether it is the first day back at school, the first family dinner, the first birthday, or the first holiday, planning ahead is a critical part of supporting the grieving child/teen through these milestones.

In many cases, it’s as simple as “checking in” with the child/teen about how they are feeling about the upcoming “first,” and then preparing to be available before, during, and after if the child/teen wants to talk, or receive extra support and affection. As much as is possible, allow children/teens to have some say in how they want the “first” to go (i.e. Do they want to be dropped off at school, rather than take the bus? Do they want to put a place setting at Grandpa’s seat at the Thanksgiving table, or make his favorite kind of pie?)

Sometimes adults may be tempted not to mention the empty seat at the table or on the bleachers, but checking in with the child/teen about how they’re feeling can give them the opportunity – and the permission – to share with you about how they’re feeling, and, by extension, to receive support and reassurance. A simple “It must have felt weird to not have your dad at the game,” or “I’m feeling really sad that your brother won’t be here with us for Christmas – how are you feeling about it?” can be significant in terms of letting a child/teen know it’s okay to talk about how difficult all of these firsts can be.

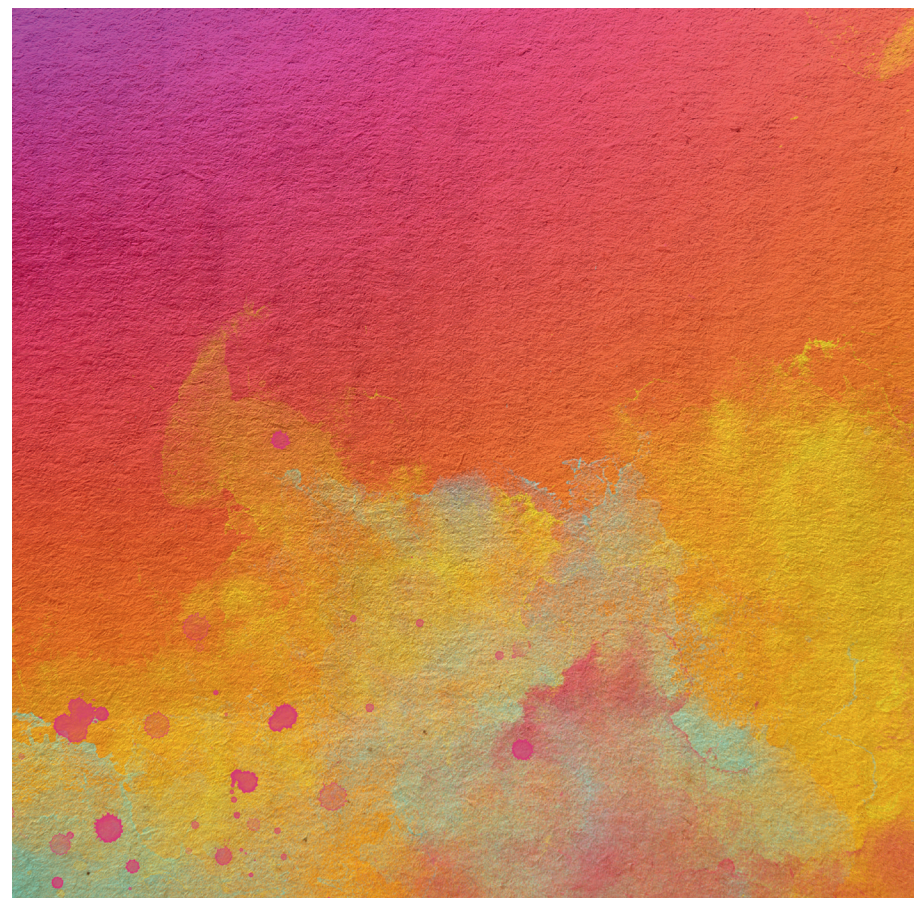
Keep in mind that what you and your child/teen might feel, or want to do, could be different. Maybe it would feel uncomfortable for you to have a place set for your loved one at the dinner table. Discussing what feels right for everyone and then coming to a solution together is an important part of figuring out how to grieve as a family – maybe setting a place at the table is too much for some, but lighting a candle in memory of the absent person feels right.

For more ideas on how to navigate the holidays and other difficult firsts, visit the Grief & Loss pages at www.frederickhealthhospice.org.

Summary of Children/Teens and Grief

Remember

- Children and teens grieve very differently than adults. Grief expression will vary and is dependent on a number of factors.
- Children and teens can sustain intense emotions for only a short period of time.
- The best predictor of children’s and teens’ coping is a parent or guardian’s coping.
- Remember that “acting out” behaviors may be a child’s or teen’s expression of grief.



Do...

Be very open with your own emotions: "I'm very sad."

Be explicit about why you feel as you do: "I'm very sad because Grandma died."

Be specific about why the death occurred: "Grandma died of a disease called cancer."

Be short on word answers and long on hugs of assurance.

Include children and teens of all ages in the family rituals, new traditions, and remembrance activities.

Allow children and teens to grieve at their own pace and in their own way.

Don't...

Push the conversation. Allow children and teens to direct the conversation.

Talk too much. Answer only the question a child asks.

Try to do your child's/teen's mourning for them. You won't succeed.

Pass off the child's or teen's fears as inappropriate. They are real.

Pretend that nothing significant has happened.

Try to "protect" the child or teen by keeping things from them or by hiding your own emotions.

Change the role of the child or teen: "Now you must be a good boy and help Daddy around the house."

Speak beyond a child's or teen's level of understanding.

We hope that this booklet has been helpful and encouraging to you. Although talking to grieving children and teens is difficult and frightening, you truly do have all of the tools you need—and with them, the ability to make a lasting impact through simply sharing information in a timely and honest way, allowing them to make the choices that feel right for them wherever possible, being available to talk (or hug!), and by reassuring them that they are still going to be loved and cared for. Children and teens are resilient and adaptable, and if supported and given the right tools, most children and teens grieve healthily and go on to have happy and loving lives and relationships.

We also want to recognize that if you are reading this, you have also probably just said goodbye, or are preparing to say goodbye, to someone that you love very much. Trying to support a grieving child/teen while you are also grieving can be extremely difficult. While we might want to protect our children and teens from seeing us upset, allowing them to see us grieve gives them permission to grieve, too. Likewise, asking for help and support when we need it encourages them to also ask for help and support when they need it.

Please know that the Frederick Health Hospice Team is here to support you in any way we can. Our support services are available to anyone in our community at no cost. We offer individual grief counseling, support groups, workshops, and grief camps. Call us at **240-566-3030** or visit **FrederickHealthHospice.org** for more information.

Resources

Frederick Health Hospice
Frederick County Office 1 Frederick Health Way,
Frederick, MD 21701
240-566-3030

Montgomery County Office
9601 Blackwell Road, Suite 360, Rockville, MD 20850

Helpful Books for Children

- *How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness: Supportive, Practical Advice from a Leading Child Life Specialist*, by Kathleen McCue M.A. C.C.L.S. and Ron Bonn
- *My Parent Has Cancer and It Really Sucks*, by Marc Silver and Maya Silver
- *A Terrible Thing Happened*, by Margaret M. Holmes
- *The Memory Box*, by Joanna Rowland
- *The Invisible String*, by Patrice Karst
- *I Miss You*, by Pat Thomas
- *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*, by Leo Buscaglia
- *The Goodbye Book*, by Todd Parr
- *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, by Bryan Mellonie
- *The Funeral (the process of a funeral)*, by Matt James
- *Tear Soup*, by Chuck Schwiebert
- *I Have a Question About Death*, by Arlen Grad Gaines
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids: 100 Practical Ideas (Healing Your Grieving Heart series)*, by Alan D. Wolfelt

- *Talking about Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child*, by Earl A. Grollman
- *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*, by Earl A. Grollman

Online Resources

- What's Your Grief (WhatsYourGrief.com): supportive articles, activities.
- Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families (Dougy.org)
- National Alliance for Grieving Children (ChildrenGrieve.org)







Frederick County Office

1 Frederick Health Way
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[FrederickHealthHospice.org](https://www.FrederickHealthHospice.org)

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