

# BUILDING *Bridges of Support*

*Guidelines for Parents when Children Grieve*



*NEWSong*

CENTER for GRIEVING CHILDREN

*A program of Hospice of the Valley*



## HELPING *Families Heal*

New Song Center is open to any child, teen, and young adult in our community, who is grieving the death of a loved one—regardless of whether Hospice of the Valley cared for that family member. We also support grieving parents, grandparents and caregivers. Families whose first language is Spanish are supported through our Luz del Corazón program.

All services are provided free of charge—there is no cost to attend New Song support groups or activities.

We offer support to schools, businesses and community groups that need grief counseling or education.

**To learn more, call (480) 951-8985 or e-mail [info@thenewsongcenter.org](mailto:info@thenewsongcenter.org)**

LET US *Help You* NAVIGATE  
ISSUES GRIEVING CHILDREN FACE

*Worrying About the Future*  
What happens now?

*Dealing with Changes*  
Everything has changed,  
nothing is the same

*Experiencing Intense Symptoms*  
Physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and  
behavioral aspects of grief

*Regaining Sense of Control*  
Nothing I can say or do will change what  
happened.

*Finding Support*  
Where do I go for help?

*Managing Fears*  
Understanding real and perceived fears

*Moving on*  
How can I move forward with some  
sense of grace and remembrance?

*Being Different*  
I just want to be like everyone else

*Understanding self-identity – roles*  
Who am I now?

*Sharing and Support*  
Who can I trust to share all this with?

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CENTER for GRIEVING CHILDREN

## GUIDELINES *for Parents* WHEN CHILDREN GRIEVE

New Song Center for Grieving Children is a resource for families and children facing the death of a loved one... or hurting after having experienced such a devastating loss. Our goal is to help you understand what your child(ren) may be going through during this difficult time. It's important to support their "grief work"—which really means allowing the young person to grow inside after someone they love has died. This occurs in several ways.

**"Letting it in"** can mean learning to believe what you could not believe at first. It can mean learning to tell your real story as well as your wish story. What are your questions? Who can you ask?

**"Letting it out"** means opening up your feelings. It can mean telling the story of your feelings. It can mean singing, dancing, playing, crying, making art, yelling, stomping, sitting quietly, sharing in some way, hugging, talking. How do you show your emotions?

**"Holding on"** is taking care of the things we do not lose when someone dies. It is about memories, stories, pictures, special things to make and to keep that help you remember the person you love. It is about special "remembering things" that you do, like lighting candles, saying the prayers or poems, or eating food your loved one liked best. Does your family do special "remembering things" to hold on together? What would you like to do?

**"Going on"** is doing new things, or doing old things in new ways. It means learning to handle the changes in your life. It could be finding new ways to help your family. It could be getting closer to the people who love you. It could be making new friends and trying new activities. Going on is growing in many ways.



# *Helping Children Cope* WITH DEATH AND GRIEF

## **Guidelines for Parents**

**Be a Good Listener:** Children need your support, love and guidance. Listening to their concerns, fears and feelings with an open heart is very healing for them. Hear what the child is asking, and provide only the necessary information to answer. It is okay to admit you don't have all the answers. Expect questions to be repeated.

**Be Reassuring:** Your acceptance and reassurance will help them feel safe and secure during a time that is scary. Make time to be physically close to them, extra hugs are always a good thing. Children are often concerned about who will care for them.

**Be Honest:** It is very important that children are told the truth about what happened. Children can often deal with devastating news when told appropriately. Secrets and half-truths are often more harmful and add to the child's confusion and diminish feelings of trust. Also share *your* feelings; let your child know how *you* are doing.

**Be Clear:** Explain "dead" in terms of the cessation of life processes: the person is no longer breathing, his heart is not beating, he can no longer eat and does not feel pain. Do not confuse them with terms like "sleeping" or "passed away."

**Be Flexible:** Children need to have their daily routines maintained; this provides a sense of security. At the same time, parents need to be flexible and make some allowances while the children are trying to deal with all their feelings including anger and sadness.

**Be Aware:** Focus on your children, watch their behavior and monitor any changes, unusual reactions or physical symptoms. Limit the amount of TV or violent games your children are exposed to. Make sure your children are getting the appropriate amount of sleep, exercise and nutrition. Their continued good health is so important.

**Be Open:** Grieving children need positive outlets for their emotions. Allowing for the expression of feelings is very important. Children may need to work out their emotions through play, artwork, sports, music, writing, or reading. Allow for the many different ways of dealing with such intense feelings as they often do not understand their emotions or what to do with them. Provide the children with as many outlets as you can. Also be open to the possibility that you may need outside help. Seek assistance when needed—that is a sign of strength.

**Be Patient:** Recognize children grieve differently than adults. Their grief is most often expressed through their behaviors instead of words. Working through such intense emotions and challenges takes time. The duration for grief is unique to each person. Children often move in and out of grief abruptly. They are sad and withdrawn one minute, active and playing the next. This roller coaster journey has many ups and downs, so be patient. Children need time to process and heal.

# GUIDELINES FOR *Understanding Children's Reactions* TO DEATH



## *Infants and Toddlers* Ages 0 to 2

### **Their experience**

If an infant cannot see something, it does not exist. Death is understood as “all gone.” Infants and small children can sense the emotional state of those around them and may exhibit increased crying, fussiness, or gastro-intestinal problems.

### **Their behavior**

Irritability, excessive crying and clinging behavior.  
Changes in sleeping and eating patterns. Temporary regression.

### **Their needs**

Stability, security, touch, play and a regular schedule is crucial.



## *Preschool* Ages 3-5

### **Their experience**

Death is considered reversible and/or temporary. Children are very concrete thinkers at this age.

### **Their behavior**

The child may believe giving food can revive the dead person. They often do not understand their feelings but are frightened by them and do not know what is happening to them. Questions about the death may be asked over and over again and their play may act out the death. Regression may occur with clinging, thumb sucking, loss of potty training or baby talk.

### **Their need**

They have a great need to return to normal activities (such as play and school). Their openness about the death with people, including strangers, can be overwhelming to adults. Provide them with words for some of their feelings. Answer questions honestly, especially about why important people in their life are sad. Death play and short term regression are normal. Offer presence and caring.





## *Grade School* Ages 6-11

### **Their experience**

Begins to understand the permanency of death and that all bodily functions stop with death. Interested in the biological facts, pain and suffering. They begin to internalize the universality and permanence of death. May view death as a visual form. i.e.: bogeyman, monsters, and angels. Death anxiety can be very high.

### **Their behavior**

They may be very curious about the details of death, but begin to hide feelings or engage in magical thinking where they believe they are powerful enough to cause someone's death by their thoughts. There may also be fear that death is a punishment for bad thoughts or behavior. Feelings of guilt may begin. Anger and acting out may arise or they may withdraw or internalize their feelings.

### **Their need**

It is essential for this age to hear truthful and honest explanations at a developmentally appropriate level. Offer constructive ways for them to release the great energy of grief, such as running, other sports activities, or hitting a pool noodle on a block wall. Encourage a support group or writing. Provide reassurance and honesty.

## *Adolescents* Ages 12 to 17



### **Their experience**

Adolescents understand death as a natural process, but have difficulty dealing with it as they are occupied with many decisions in their own lives. The loss may be protested through acting out and /or withdrawing or overachieving.

### **Their behavior**

Teens tend to focus on what effect the death has had on them and thus dwell on the unfairness of life. They become concerned about the “why” questions of life and may test their own mortality. They may sometimes seem to defy death with negative behaviors like alcohol, sex and cutting—or they may fantasize about death and withdraw socially to deny or lessen their pain.

### **Their need**

Try to tolerate acting out behaviors if no harm is done. A short period of withdrawal is normal. Encourage the search for meaning in a healthy way. Teen are often more comfortable talking about death with their friends than with adults. Peers and peer support become more important. Adults should provide a balance between empathic understanding and continued structure in their environment. Continue to set reasonable limits and let them know you care about them.



*Young Adults*  
Ages 18 and up

**Their experience**

This age group often feels like the forgotten mourners. Feelings of isolation may be great as they are away from home at college or embarking upon their first “adult” jobs and establishing their own identity.

**Their behavior**

Striving for independence and identity development: Who am I and who do I want to be? Am I living the life I want for myself?

**Their need**

A safe and supportive environment where they can explore their emotions, and externalize their feelings is essential. Using expressive arts and the opportunity to focus on relationships, identity, and their emotions within a peer group is extremely important. Using collage, creating shields that discuss their “walls” or protection, masks (inside out concepts) and/or healthy vs not healthy coping strategies, Encouraging journaling or letter writing to explore their own feelings can be a powerful tool.



*“What a gift you have given my children... an opportunity to heal now so they don’t grow up to be grieving adults and unable to make intimate connections with others.”*



**Building Bridges of Support: Guidelines for Parents when Children Grieve**

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