

If you or someone you know needs help explaining death to a child, ask us for a list of books and video tapes.



# Helping Children... Cope With Death



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## Death is a difficult concept.

Communicating about loss is hard for children and adults. And so, we perpetuate the conspiracy of silence because we don't know what to say or maybe even realize that we can say something.

Most of us think that children don't understand death or loss. Children are often left out or ignored by grieving adults who may not have the energy, resources, or understanding needed to help.

Often, we pacify ourselves with the rationale that "children are resilient," and thus, fail to recognize that children need compassionate and concerned support.



## Children Have an Awareness of Death.

Kids form ideas about death from watching television, reading books, talking with friends, etc. They learn quickly whom they can and cannot talk to about the subject. As their experience grows from observing the death of flowers, insects, and birds to that of pets and people, children's concepts widen. When someone they love dies, they then begin to experience the same emotions adults have when death occurs.



Listening to the news or adult conversations can influence a child's perception of grief or loss.

## Reacting to Loss.

### Physical Complaints

- Headaches
- Upset tummy
- Aches and pains
- Invisible "ouchies"

### Increased Anxiety

- Fear
- Panic attacks

### Regressive Behavior

- Thumb-sucking
- Bed-wetting
- Reverting to a bottle

### Anger

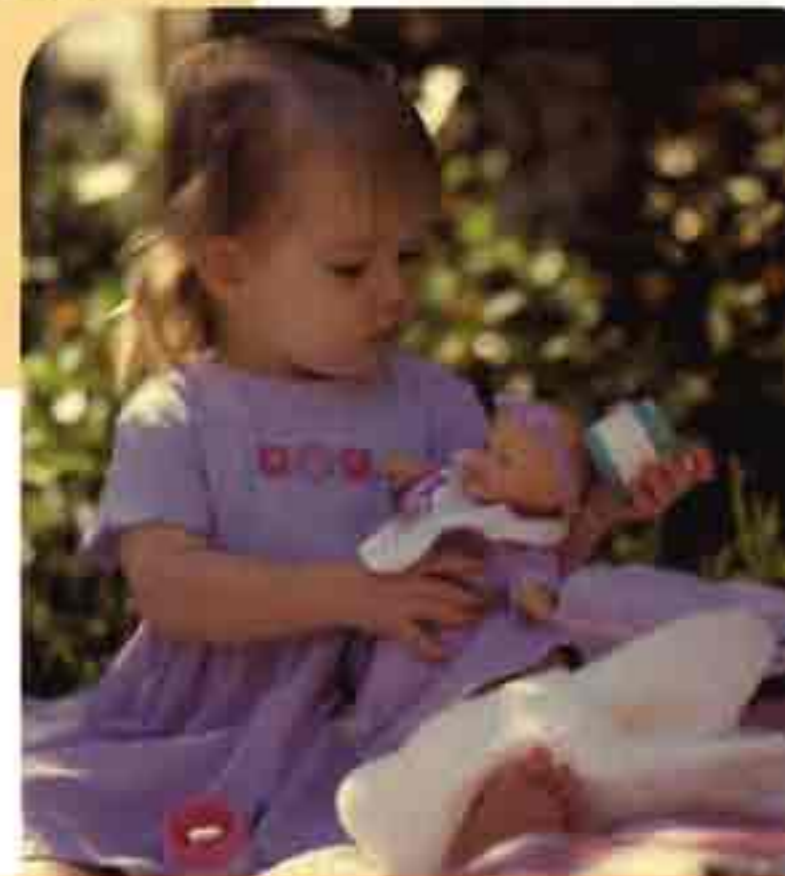
- Shouting
- Aggression

### Avoidance

- Denial that the person has died
- Pretending deceased is on vacation or shopping



Children and their caregivers need to realize that although unusual, these are normal reactions.





## How Does Grief Differ by Age?

From infancy through adolescence, children deal with death differently at every age.

- **Infants** - Although babies don't realize a death has occurred, changes in feeding times, caregivers, and nap times can cause irritability and an increased need for attention.
- **Preschoolers** - Preschool children tend to see death as temporary and reversible. Cartoon characters miraculously return after being "squashed" so they think death has an ending. They might ask, "When is Grandma going to be through being dead and come back?"
- **Elementary School** - For children in elementary school, death is often seen as a person, one with special powers to pick and choose who dies. Death breaks the rules that these children are just learning about, and "it's not fair" is a familiar phrase regarding death.



- **Middle School** - Middle School children know that everyone dies, but they hope they won't die until they are "really old." They are fascinated with the "gory details" and want to touch a dead pet. They also want to know why it died. They want facts and information on how death occurs.
- **High School** - Most adolescents have very intense emotions. They do not, however, have the experience and perspective of adults and may often distort the limits of life. Teens believe they may die from a blemish, but do not see the risks in driving too fast. They may "taunt" death in an attempt to know the limits of their control.

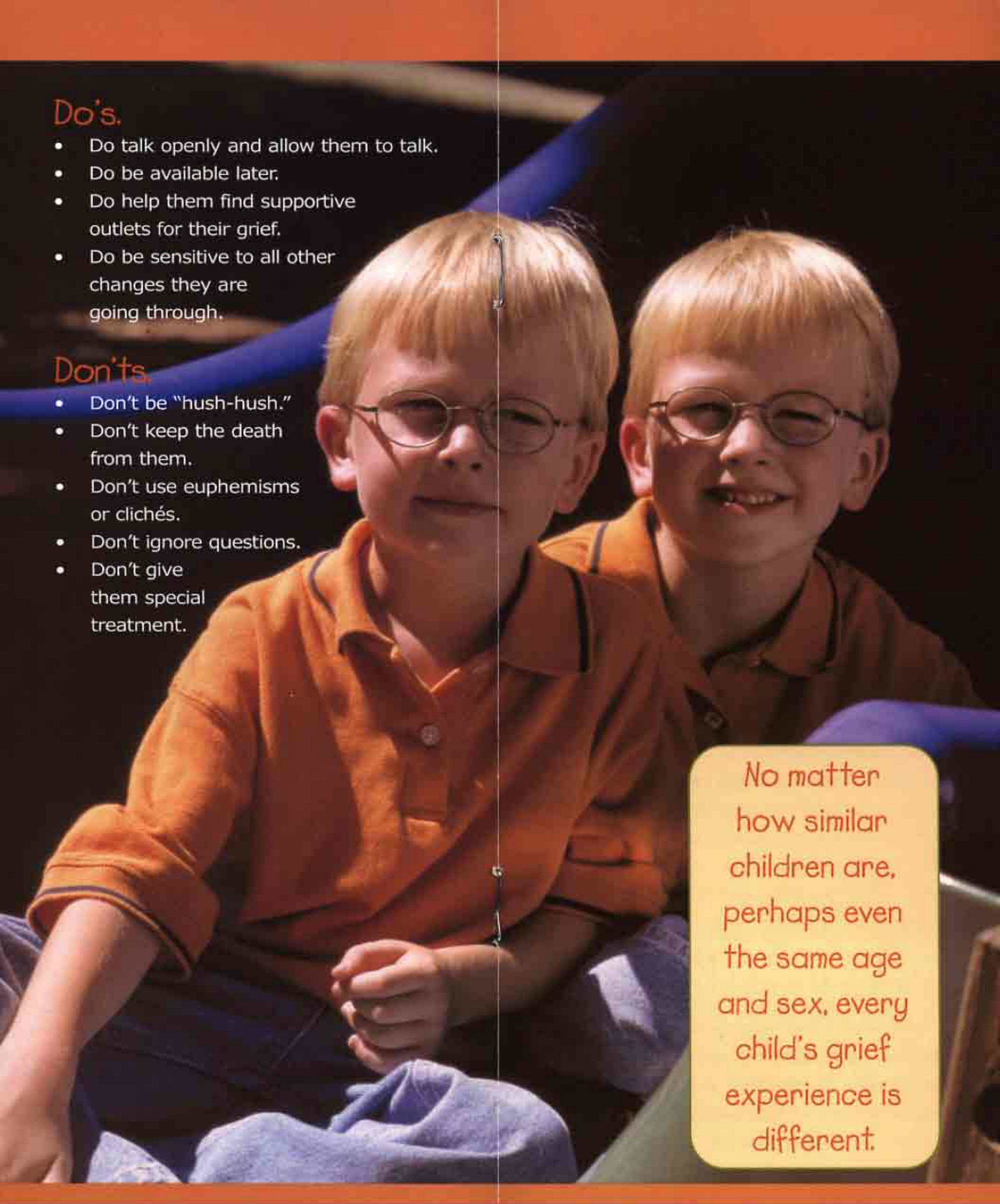


## Do's.

- Do talk openly and allow them to talk.
- Do be available later.
- Do help them find supportive outlets for their grief.
- Do be sensitive to all other changes they are going through.

## Don'ts.

- Don't be "hush-hush."
- Don't keep the death from them.
- Don't use euphemisms or clichés.
- Don't ignore questions.
- Don't give them special treatment.

A photograph of two young boys with light brown hair and round glasses, wearing orange polo shirts and blue pants. They are sitting together, looking towards the camera. The boy on the left has a neutral expression, while the boy on the right is smiling slightly. The background is dark with some blue fabric visible.

No matter how similar children are, perhaps even the same age and sex, every child's grief experience is different.



## How do I know if the child is able to understand?

Children tend to cope with change by expressing themselves through actions. We often must take our cues from their behaviors. They may not understand why they hurt, but they can identify that they hurt.



## Should I let others know what the child is feeling?

It's important to communicate with the child's school and social network. Others may not know your child is grieving and may have unrealistic expectations for behavior. However, don't try to single out the grieving child for special privileges because he or she still needs to feel part of a peer group.

## What happens when bad behavior is exhibited?

Grief should not be an excuse for poor behavior. Maintain discipline. Consistency is an anchor in a "topsy-turvy" world, so set realistic goals concerning behavior and school performance.

## What will help the child the most?

Let the child's needs be your guide to responding. Answer their questions openly and honestly and continue to be available and supportive.

## What if the child does not appear to grieve?

Realize responses may not be immediate or obvious. It may take months or even years before a child displays signs of the full impact of a death.

## How can I help the child deal with his or her emotions?

Find constructive outlets for the child to express anger, frustration, pain, and grief in appropriate ways. Exercising, drawing, painting, participating in music, and role-playing are all ways to physically release the strong emotions of death.



## Children and the Funeral.

Help children be a part of the mourning process by including them in whatever rituals, memorials, and activities are planned. Not attending can make children feel isolated and often leads to regret or resentment later. However, it is important to prepare them as much as possible for the service or event.



A funeral will have a long-term impact on a child, whether he or she attends or not.

Children should be given the opportunity to choose the level of participation that makes them feel comfortable. Some might request a private moment with the deceased before or after the viewing, and other children find comfort in writing a letter or poem or placing special items in the casket. Many children just want to be with their family. Let them decide.



## When is it necessary to ask for help?

While there are no "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve, there are some reactions that do require extra help and support.

These can include:

- Depression that lasts more than a few days
- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Total lack of interest in previously engaging activities
- Obsession with the deceased
- Inability to engage in daily activities such as dressing, attending school, or brushing teeth
- Extreme expressions of guilt such as self-punitive behaviors

Additional support and guidance can be obtained through your child's school counselor, physician, pastor, or mental health professional. Do not be embarrassed to ask for help. Grief is hard and often very painful, for both you and your child.

We can't take away the hurt, but we can build supports and safety nets.



## Love Never Goes Away.

We do not lose people, they die. But the love we shared with them can never be destroyed. They are a thread in our fabric, an ongoing influence in our life.

Grief can last a lifetime, but the negative aspects of it do not have to dominate our existence. When loss occurs, we have an opportunity to strengthen our values and appreciation for life. We can help children do this by turning to traditions, faith, and memories. They will learn from us that we can use our love for those we lost to enrich our lives and other's lives.

The gifts within love are ever so powerful. We must continue to reach out and care for our children and for ourselves as well.

