

## Tips on How to Talk to Children and Teens About Loss

It is estimated that 1 in 11 children in Florida will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18. This number more than doubles with youth who will be bereaved by age 25 (Judi's House, 2024).

Parents and caregivers often need support themselves when caring for children after a loss. In responding to a loss or crisis, whether it's a death, natural disaster, violence or trauma, children and their families can benefit from the following information as a guide for conversation and support with children and teens during times of need.

- **Reflect:** Any effort to assist your child(ren) should begin with self-reflection. Children and teens are sensitive to the stress felt by adults and may withhold their needs to not burden others.
- **Assess:** When speaking with your child about loss, understanding what they already know can help you frame the conversation. Asking questions helps build trust and to realize their opinions are important to you, even when you disagree.
- **Listen:** Listen for the thoughts, needs and feelings behind what is shared. As you listen to your child, identify things they say which are not true so you can provide accurate information.
- **Talk:** Children and teens benefit from honest, clear, and age-appropriate information. Withholding information can contribute to their natural anxieties and may give the impression that things are too horrible to discuss. As a general rule, the younger the child is, the simpler the explanation you provide them needs to be. It is always better to keep things simple and concrete. If your child has more questions, you can provide them with additional information. This will be a continuing conversation. It will not, and does not, need to occur in one sitting.
- **Be an example:** Sharing your feelings, and being honest about your emotions, sets a good example for children and teens. Let them know it is OK to feel, for example, crying often helps us to feel better. Your children benefit from seeing what appropriate coping looks like. Hiding your feelings may give the impression that we should not talk about things that are difficult. If you are having trouble managing your emotions, find support for yourself.
- **Stay Open:** Children will often repeat questions about the death in an effort to gain understanding. Their comprehension may be limited by their developmental level. They may even exhibit a morbid curiosity about the details. Keep in mind that their curiosity is not intended



to be hurtful or annoying. Be prepared to respond more than once, and with consistency, to the same questions. After a loss or a crisis, many children and adults need understanding and reassurance that they will be safe.

You may not have all the answers, especially to the “big” questions that children or teens ask such as “why.” Often, the best response is “What do you think?” This response opens the door to the conversation and an insight to their concerns and needs.

- **Safeguard:** Exposing your child and teens to continued or repeated stories/images about a loss and other crisis events can be overwhelming. Younger children may believe that repeated images and news stories are separate events and that dangers have not passed. Exposure to the media can also contribute to your stress and will be perceived by those around you. Focus on what you can control. This may be an opportunity to discuss established plans for safety and family/community response.

- **Be Watchful:** It is common for children to feel confused, anxious, and have difficulty paying attention or concentrating after a loss or crisis event. Some may be agitated, irritable, defensive or withdrawn. Separation anxiety may occur and occasionally a child may exhibit regressive behavior like thumb sucking or bed-wetting. It is common for children to feel anxious about what has happened and how it will impact their lives. If the child or teen had functioned well before the crisis, it is expected that they will return to their previous behaviors within a few weeks.

- **Maintain Routine:** A routine is a helpful strategy as so much has already changed in a grieving child’s life. As a parent or caregiver of a grieving child, try to build routine and predictability into their day as much as possible. In the case that these adjustments take more time, it is recommended to seek out individual counseling.

- **Share:** It is critical to share information about the loss to important people in your children’s life. This includes school staff and administrators, pediatricians, and parents/caregivers of your children’s friends. By sharing the loss, teachers and school staff will be able to note any behavioral changes as they return to school. A plan can be made in school if your child is struggling during class time to have breaks or see a school counselor. Make sure your child or teen knows that you shared information with their teachers, they need to understand there is a community of support surrounding them.

- **Find Support:** There are a plethora of resources and organizations available to provide assistance following a loss. Reaching out and connecting with family and friends is critical in the grieving process. Now, more than ever, no one should grieve alone.

The Children’s Bereavement Center “CBC” is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization providing FREE grief support groups for all ages (4+). Lift From Loss® is a division of CBC providing support for young adults and adults. For additional resources, visit our website at [www.childbereavement.org](http://www.childbereavement.org). To register for our free virtual grief support groups, call us at (888) 988-5438 or e-mail [support@childbereavement.org](mailto:support@childbereavement.org).



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