



Supporting Grief and Loss

Head Start Heals - Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What actions or steps should I take to comfort a preschooler whose parent has died? What is my role as teacher if a child experiences death in the family?

Bereaved preschoolers need extra connection with caring adults during such a lonely time in their lives. Teachers have an important role in supporting the child and surviving family members by helping establish normal routines and activities. They may want to tell this story many times because it relieves some of the hurt. You do not need to have something special to say. You just need to show interest, sit close, listen quietly, and validate their feelings. You can say things like, “You really miss your mommy”, or “It was so much fun to take walks with grandpa”, or “Your daddy loved you so much.”

Just listening is an important gift. Encourage the child to bring in a picture if he/she would like to. Provide extra opportunities for creative play and artistic expression, since many children will tell their “story” through play.

Make sure that someone in the program spends extra time over several weeks with the surviving parent to give them a chance to talk, too, and answer questions about how to respond to the child’s needs at home. Perhaps, they can create a memory box, or include the child in rituals like lighting memorial candles or drawing pictures, consistent with their culture and family traditions.

Additional Resources:

Alan Wolfelt, Helping Infants and Toddlers When Someone They Love Dies

http://griefwords.com/index.cgi?action=page&page=articles%2Fhelping26.html&site_id=70

You Can’t Protect Your Kids From The Pain of Loss of a Loved One, But You Can Help Build Healthy Coping

<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>

Mental Health Resources Support Response Recovery

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/mental-health-resources-support-response-recovery>

Trauma Adverse Childhood Experiences ACES

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/trauma-adverse-childhood-experiences-aces>

Q. How do you explain the concept of death to a preschooler? Should we tell the children the teacher left or tell them the truth that the teacher passed away?

It is important to be honest if someone died, and give very simple explanations. In the instance of the teacher's death, the social service staff or program leadership will likely inform parents and give them simple ways to explain the loss to each child individually. The program's mental health consultant can also be a helpful resource for offering ways to share this information with families.

If a child should ask you what does it mean when someone dies, you might say, "When a person dies, their body stops working. They cannot talk, or eat, or move anymore, and they do not hurt (or feel sick)." When you are talking with a child who experienced loss, ask them if they have any questions or worries so that you can respond. It is fine if you say, "I don't know."

Additional Resources:

Guiding Adults in Talking to Children About Death and Attending Services

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/guiding_adults_in_talking_about_death_and_services.pdf

Sesame Street - Explaining Death to Children

<https://sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org/topic/grief/?ytid=XI4-8ZQ1PRE>

The Do's and Don'ts of Talking with a Child about Death

[The-dos-and-don'ts-talking-child-about-death](#)

Discussing Death With Children

<https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=discussing-death-with-children-90-P03046>

Q. What happens when infants and toddlers experience the death of someone they love? What age is too young to talk with a child about the death of a parent?

Many adults think that infants, and young toddlers cannot grieve, but this is a myth. Any child who is old enough to love is old enough to grieve. Even a baby notices the loss of their loved one and reacts to it. You may note increased crying, sadness, or changes in patterns of feeding and sleeping.

Try to maintain the child's original schedule if possible. Offer physical comfort by holding the child (perhaps in a front pack), give baby massages, talk, sing, rock and smile with the baby throughout the day. Do not worry about spoiling the child. This extra contact is important to help the child feel secure.

Toddlers also need physical comfort and the security of calm and predictable routines. This is not a good time to start in a new school or make other changes. It is best for the child to have one-on-one attention with a primary caregiver or teacher throughout the day. It would not be unusual if they displayed "babyish" behaviors like lapses in toilet training, waking through the night or increased clinginess. Just be patient and accepting. In general, if a child asks for Mommy, it is best to be honest and to say that she is dead, even though this will not be fully understood, rather than to say she is "sleeping", or "went bye-bye," which can be confusing, or even scary.

Additional Resources:

Helping Your Toddler Cope with Grief and Death

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3366-helping-your-toddler-cope-with-grief-and-death>

Guiding Adults in Talking to Children About Death and Attending Services

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/guiding_adults_in_talking_about_death_and_services.pdf

When A Family Grieves

<https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=when-a-family-grieves-1-1746>

Q. What can I expect if a child is bereaved?

Bereaved preschoolers can seem overwhelmed with sadness, anger, fear, or frustration at times and seem totally “fine” at other times. This is normal. They often do not understand that death is permanent, so they may expect the person who died to return. Sometimes they worry that they are to blame for the person’s death (if they had not misbehaved, maybe the person would not have died). You can reassure them that it is not their fault in any way. Keep your ears open for worries like this.

Additional Resources:

Bereavement Reactions of Children and Young People By Age Group

<https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group>

Grief and Children

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx

Bereavement During Childhood and Adolescence

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK217849/>

Q. What are the signs of trauma in a child when a parent dies, and when should I refer the child and family to extra supports or therapy?

When a child is bereaved, it can be very helpful for Head Start teachers to access mental health consultation or social service support. A referral of the surviving caregiver and child to meet with a therapist can be helpful for any infant, toddler, or preschooler who has this kind of profound loss. While most children eventually adapt to the loss, they may grieve again for their parents at key milestones as they grow up. A smaller number of children develop persistent trauma symptoms which can affect them later in life. To reduce distress and head off long-term problems, check with a mental health specialist. Refer the child for additional supports if his/her reactions seem to be prolonged, intense, or if the child is showing the following signs:

- Difficulties with eating or sleeping that do not resolve
- Marked social withdrawal
- Difficulty talking about the person who died
- Aggressive behavior, or anger
- Cruelty to people or animals
- Expressions of guilt or blame that persist
- Fearfulness or sadness that is intense or does not lift
- Physical symptoms like stomach aches or headaches
- Nightmares or upsetting images about the death
- Lack of ability to give and receive affection

Additional Resources:

Helping a Child Cope With the Death of a Parent

<https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/helping-child-cope-death-parent>

When to Seek Referral or Consultation

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Member_Resources/Practice_Information/When to Seek Referral or Consultation with a CAP.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Member_Resources/Practice_Information/When_to_Seek_Referral_or_Consultation_with_a_CAP.aspx)

Promoting Empathy and Understanding Trauma

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/safety-practices/article/promoting-empathy-understanding-trauma>

Q. How do you respond to a child who has lost someone to COVID-19 who is afraid his other loved ones will leave him?

Children who lose someone close sometimes worry that other family members will die, too. If worries of this sort arise, you can acknowledge the concern, “you sound really worried.” Reassure the child that key adults in the circle of his family are healthy and strong and being very careful to stay safe. You might add that you expect the surviving parent will be around when he is all grown up. Make sure your lesson plans include relaxation activities and that your classroom maintains a consistent, positive routine. Focus on connecting with this child repeatedly through the day and find activities that engage him and play to his strengths.

Additional Resources:

Dealing With Loss During COVID-19: Helping Children and Families

https://www.stonybrookmedicine.edu/Crowell_Dealing_with_loss_during_COVID-19

Helping Your Toddler Cope With Grief and Death

[3366-helping-your-toddler-cope-with-grief-and-death](https://www.stonybrookmedicine.edu/3366-helping-your-toddler-cope-with-grief-and-death)

Helping Children with Traumatic Separation or Traumatic Grief Related to COVID-19

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/helping_children_with_traumatic_separation_or_traumatic_grief_related_to_covid19.pdf

Kids Scared of Death From COVID-19

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/kids-scared-of-death-from-coronavirus-4802235>

Q. How can we help parents understand that a child is not too young to grieve and might benefit from extra support or therapy?

Families who are feeling sad may not initially be able to bear the thought that their little one could be suffering. Be patient, gently share information with the bereaved parent about reactions typically seen in young children, like changes in sleep patterns and fearfulness, etc. Encourage them to keep up their wonderful efforts to provide extra tenderness to the child. Continue to inquire about the parent's well-being and about the child's adjustment at home. Pull in social services to support the grieving parent.

Additional Resources:

Is This Just a Stage?

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/children-and-mental-health/index.shtml>

After a Loved One Dies

<https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Documents/After-a-Loved-One-Dies-English.pdf>

Bereavement Reactions of Children and Young People By Age Group

<https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group>

Tell Me A Story Series

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/tell-me-story-series>

Q. How do you help a family that lost the father of their household during the lockdown time?

Make sure that their basic needs for food, shelter and an income source are addressed as quickly as possible. Your program should make sure that someone is in daily contact with the widow to check in on her wellbeing and that of the children. Find out what natural support she has in her life (family, friends, etc.) that can be supportive. What are her priorities and concerns? Kindness from the staff and other families can go a long way.

Additional Resources:

A Guide to Helping and Getting Help During the Coronavirus Crisis

<https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2020/health/coronavirus-how-to-help/#meals-and-food-support>

Death of a Loved One

<https://hr.uw.edu/coronavirus/uw-carelink-during-covid-19/death-of-a-loved-one/>

Q. When adults are not able to grieve in traditional ways because of the pandemic, how can we help them?

Social distancing and isolation can make grief so much more challenging. We rely so much on hugs and physical closeness for solace in normal times. Some of the comforts of traditional mourning practices can be maintained, though, even at a distance. Make sure that basic needs of the people left behind are being met. It is more important now more than ever to make repeated efforts to stay in contact and head off potential isolation. One of the great comforts in traditional gatherings is the opportunity for a mourner to tell people about the beloved person who died, to hear stories about them and to have friends and family honor the life that was lost. We can make opportunities for mourners to talk by asking what brought their loved one joy, what was important to them and to ask to know more about the family. Find out about relevant cultural traditions and look for meaningful ways to honor the life that was lost while remembering the people left behind.

Additional Resources:

Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for Parents and Caregivers

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/childhood_traumatic_grief_information_for_parents_and_caregivers.pdf

Supporting Grieving Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Global Health Crisis

https://www.dougy.org/docs/Grief_during_COVID-19.pdf