

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers:

Guiding Children of Different Ages through Grief



Children understand and cope with loss of a loved one differently at each age. Explaining what has happened in a way they can understand can make a big difference as they navigate their grief.

If you or your child need additional support, please don't hesitate to talk to your loved one's Social Worker or Chaplain.









INFANTS

(0 TO 12 MONTHS OLD)

Understanding

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- Babies don't understand death, but they sense it through emotions, voices and touch.
 - They may react to loss by:
 - becoming more withdrawn or irritable
 - trouble sleeping
 - changes in appetite

Ways to help

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- **Watch for changes in behaviour** - babies cannot their feelings with words.
 - **Hold and cuddle** your baby to help them feel safe and loved.
 - **Keep routines and caregivers consistent** to provide a sense of security.

Preparing your child for the visit



Stick to routines

- Avoid visits during naptime or feeding times.

Stay calm and present

- Speak softly and carry your baby gently.

Bring comfort items

- Pack a favorite toy, blanket, or pacifier to help them feel secure.

Keep visits short

- This helps prevent your baby from becoming overwhelmed.



TODDLERS

(12 MONTHS TO 2 YEARS OLD)



Understanding

- Toddlers don't fully understand death, but they can feel the absence of loved ones.
- They may not grasp that death is permanent, or that it happens to everyone.
- It's normal for them to cry, throw tantrums or become more clingy.
- They might also express grief through complaints of physical aches/ pains.



Ways to help

- **Give hugs and cuddles** - this helps them to feel safe and loved.
- **Offer a favourite toy or comfort item**, like a pillow or teddy bear.
- **Keep routines and caregivers consistent** as much as possible.
- **Stay calm and speak gently** - this helps your child to feel safe and reassured.



Preparing your child for the visit

Use simple language and explain what they may see

- Say things like, “Grandma is very sick and resting.” Avoid confusing phrases like “gone to sleep.”
- Share that your loved one may be lying on the bed, looking tired, or may not speak. There may be machines, tubes or other medical devices around them.

Stay calm and bring a comfort item

- Talk to your child calmly and offer comforting touches, like hugs, to help them feel safe.
- Bring a favorite toy, blanket, or pacifier to help them feel secure.

Stick to routines

- Avoid visits during nap times or meals.
- Keep visits short to prevent overwhelming your child.

Give them choices

- Let your child decide what they want to do during the visit - whether to say hello, draw a picture, or just stay nearby.

If your child does not want to visit

- Ask gently why and listen to their feelings.
- Let them know it's okay not to visit. You can suggest visiting another time if they feel ready.







PRE-SCHOOLERS

(3 TO 6 YEARS OLD)

Understanding

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- Pre-schoolers are just beginning to understand what death means.
 - They may think only old or sick people die.
 - They may believe death happened as a punishment for their actions.
 - They may think the person can come back or still move or think.
 - They may show signs like clinginess, regression (e.g. thumb sucking, bed wetting, throwing tantrums) or have trouble focusing.

Ways to help

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- **Use clear words** like 'died' instead of confusing phrases like 'gone to a better place'.
 - **Be open** - encourage questions and let them share their feelings.
 - **Answer** honestly - use simple words they can understand.
 - **Reassure them** that they are loved and cared for.
 - **Show them healthy ways** to express their feelings (e.g. reading books about grief, art, music)



Preparing your child for the visit



Use simple, clear words and explain what they might see

- Keep explanations short, like: “*Grandpa is very sick, and will not get better.*” Avoid confusing phrases like “gone to sleep.”
- Describe what they might see: your loved one may be lying in bed, looking tired and may not speak. There may be machines, tubes or other medical devices around them.
- Answer questions calmly - it’s okay if you don’t have all the answers.

Bring comfort items

- Bring a favorite toy or blanket to help them feel secure.

Give them choices

- Let your child decide what they want to do during the visit - whether to say hello, draw a picture, or just stay nearby.

Encourage them to express their feelings after the visit

- Use activities like stories, music and drawing.
- Reassure them that they did not cause the illness.
- Let them know that any feelings they have are normal.

If your child does not want to visit

- Ask gently why and listen to their feelings.
- Let them know it’s okay not to visit. You can suggest visiting another time if they feel ready.

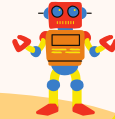


LOWER-PRIMARY

(7 TO 9 YEARS OLD)

Understanding

- Children at this age understand that death is permanent and that the body stops working.
- They may think that only old people die.
- They might associate death with scary images, like ghosts or haunted houses.
- Some may ask a lot of questions, while others may avoid the topic.
- They may also have mood swings as they cope with grief in 'small doses'.



Ways to help

- **Use stories or activity books** to help them express their feelings. Speak to our Chaplains/ Social Worker if you'd like a copy of these resources.
- **Correct any misunderstandings gently** - listen and address their fears or anxieties.
- **Involve your child** in age-appropriate decisions and activities, such as in rituals or funerals if they're comfortable - it may help them feel connected and less isolated.



Preparing your child for the visit

Give simple and honest information

- Use clear language: *“Grandpa is very sick and dying. His body will stop working soon. He is in a place called a hospice, and the doctors and nurses are making him comfortable.”*
- Answer questions honestly- it’s okay if you don’t have all the answers.

Describe what they might see

- Your loved one may be lying in bed, looking tired, or may not speak. There may be machines, tubes or other medical devices around them.

Involve them in simple choices

- Let your child decide how they’d like to be involved — bring a gift, make a card, say hello, or wait outside.

Encourage them to express their feelings after the visit

- Use activities like stories, music, and drawing.
- Normalise any emotions.

If your child does not want to visit

- Ask gently why and listen to their feelings.
- Let them know it’s okay not to visit. You can suggest visiting another time if they feel ready.

UPPER-PRIMARY

(10 TO 12 YEARS OLD)



Understanding

- Children at this age understand that death is final and can happen to anyone.
- They may struggle with death's finality due to beliefs about the afterlife.
- They might think death won't happen to them or their loved ones.
- They may show sadness/ fear/ anger or mood-swings and act out to cope with their emotions.
- They may hide their feelings and appear unbothered.

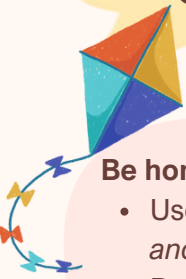


Ways to help

- **Give clear and honest answers** - it's okay to say 'I don't know' if you don't have the answers.
- **Assure your child** that the deceased is no longer in pain.
- **Be present** - Listen and spend time with your child.
- **Explain what to expect** during the rituals and stay with them throughout.



Preparing your child for the visit



Be honest and direct

- Use clear language *“Yes, Grandpa is dying. His body is very sick and won’t get better.”*
- Reassure them - *“Even though Grandma can’t talk or move much now, she is not suffering. The hospice team is helping her feel comfortable.”*
- Acknowledge what you do or do not know. It’s okay if you don’t have all the answers.

Describe what they might see

- Explain that your loved one may be lying on the bed, look tired, or may not speak. There may be machines, tubes or other medical devices, soft conversations or people crying.

Let them take part

- Allow your child to participate in small ways — writing a letter, bringing a gift or helping with some tasks if they wish.

Encourage them to express their feelings after the visit

- Use activities like stories, music, and drawing.
- Normalise any emotions.

If your child does not want to visit

- Ask gently why and listen to their feelings.
- Let them know it’s okay not to visit. You can suggest visiting another time if they feel ready.



ADOLESCENTS

(13 TO 18 YEARS OLD)



Understanding

- Adolescents understand that death is final and can happen for many reasons.
- They may show a range of emotions like anger, sadness, withdrawal, or rebellious behaviour.
- They may believe death happens to others, not themselves.
- They might research on death, or take on adult roles - like caring for others.
- They may ask deep questions about life and death.

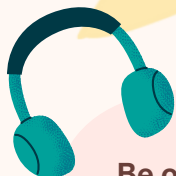


Ways to help

- **Give clear, accurate information** whenever possible.
- **Listen actively** instead of rushing to give solutions.
- **Share your thoughts and feelings** with your child if it feels right.
- **Involve your child** in discussions about rituals or changes to daily routines.
- **Spend meaningful time** together



Preparing your child for the visit



Be open, honest and direct

- Provide detailed information, such as: *“Grandpa has terminal cancer and only a few months left. Would you like to know more?”*
- Respect their choice on how much they want to know.

Describe what they might see

- Explain that your loved one may be lying on the bed, looking tired, or may not speak. There may be machines, tubes or other medical devices, soft conversations or people crying.

Include them in choices and responsibilities

- Allow your child to participate in small ways — writing a letter, bringing a gift or helping with some tasks if they wish.
- You can also give them responsibilities such as keeping their loved one company or simple caregiving tasks such as cleaning their face or applying lotion.

Encourage them to express their feelings after the visit

- Use art, music, or writing to help them express their feelings.
- Normalise any emotions.

If your child does not want to visit

- Ask gently why and listen to their feelings.
- Let them know it's okay not to visit. You can suggest visiting another time if they feel ready.



Other Resources



**Palliative Care at
St Luke's**



**Singapore Hospice Council
Caregiver Resources**

References:

Singapore Hospice Council - Caring for yourself after a death
<https://www.singaporehospice.org.sg/e-library/docs/caring-for-yourself-and-others-after-a-death/>

Care Dimensions
<https://www.caredimensions.org>

Coastal Home Health & Hospice
<https://www.coastalhvh.org>

Hospice of the Piedmont
<https://hopva.org>