

Parents' names:

To the Person Caring for Our Child

Contact info:

Our family is missing a child.

Our child _____ may mention their sibling who died, so we wanted you to know.

Briefly, this is what happened: _____

What we'd like you to know so you can best support our child is: _____

Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns!

No parent wants death to be a part of a young child's experience, but sometimes it is. Our child needs our help to understand what happened. The following information has helped us know better how to support our child, and we believe it will be helpful to you, too.

Why should young children learn about death? Shouldn't we protect them from the harshness of death?

Death is an inevitable, unavoidable fact of life. We can't protect our child from experiencing death, so we need to help them understand it. Even though young children don't understand the concept of death, they experience loss and grief, as well as reactions and emotions of others around them. They feel confused, anxious, scared, emotions they don't understand. Adults need to help them begin to understand death and the normal and natural responses to loss that are grief. The child who is supported in facing death and grieving grows up to be an adult who is prepared to cope in positive ways with life's losses.

What should young children learn about death?

Death is confusing to young children, so they need simple honest information that they can understand. Use the accurate words "died" and "dead" that clearly, factually state what happened to their loved one. Provide factual information such as:

- Everything that lives will one day die.
- When a person dies, their body stops working. They can't move, talk, feel, or do any of the things they used to do.
- They will not be coming back; we won't be able to visit or play with them anymore.

Many commonly used phrases are confusing—"we lost the baby," they "went away" or "passed," or they're "gone" or "sleeping." Children don't require a lot of explanation—just enough honest, age-appropriate information to help them make sense of what happened. Allow them to ask questions as they want to know more. Then answer honestly and simply.

What might a young child's grief look like?

Children who are experiencing grief won't usually tell you how they're feeling, especially since they may not have the words for it. But they'll show you. You may notice:

- Lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities, feeling the heaviness of life that is no longer what they knew.
- Sadness on and off over an extended period of time, grieving in spurts to avoid the overwhelm of unfamiliar emotions.
- Reverting to younger behavior, clingy, want attention, trying to restore a lost sense of security.
- Anger revealed in aggression, irritability, boisterous play, expressing confusion, anxiety, and feelings they don't understand.
- Wanting to do everything right in an attempt to avoid upsetting adults who are dealing with grief.
- Uncharacteristically quiet or fearful, feeling the anxiety and uncertainty of loss and grief.
- Loss of appetite, inability to sleep because grief is a physiological as well as emotional experience.
- May seem unaffected immersed in play, which is how children process difficult emotions and experiences.

What is unique about childhood sibling loss?

- Sibling grief is often unseen, overshadowed in people's minds by the parents' loss of their child. But even very young siblings grieve.
- Children who lose a sibling also lose their parents as they knew them and much about their life that felt safe and comfortable.
- The death of a sibling shakes a child's sense of security. They learn that children can die, and they wonder if they or their parent will die, too.
- A sibling relationship is an integral part of a child's identity; the loss of a sibling has lifelong implications for a child's sense of self and belonging.
- The surviving child needs to know they are as special and loved as the child who died, and that life still holds good things for them.
- Maintaining the sibling connection with activities and remembrances that continue the bond has been shown to benefit and be a comfort for bereaved siblings throughout their lives, even if they don't have personal memories of their sibling.
- Death ends a life, but it doesn't end the relationship. Our child who died is still a member of our family, and our child who lives is still a sibling, a "sibling by heart."

The bottom line . . .

A child who is grieving needs adults' awareness and sensitivity, empathy and compassion. Acknowledging what you know about their experience and giving them an opportunity to tell you about it is helpful. That normalizes their experience and lets them know it's okay to talk about it.

Sometimes adults worry about saying the wrong thing. We learned that the important thing is to be honest in what we share with our child, invite conversation, listen without interruption, correction, or attempts to fix—and give a lot of hugs. It's that simple.

Visit goodgriefparenting.com for more information about early childhood sibling loss and children's grief.

Books About Life, Death, Loss, and Emotions for 3-4-year-olds

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Bryan Mellonie

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst

I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm

The Elephant in the Room: A Children's Book for Grief and Loss by Amanda Edwards and Leslie Ponciano

The Boy Who Didn't Want to Be Sad by Dr. Robert Goldblatt PsyD

Water Bugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children by Doris Stickney

Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death by Bonnie Zucker

The Memory Box: A Book About Grief by Joanna Rowland

The Grandpa Tree by Mike Donahue

How I Feel: A coloring book for grieving children by Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D

A Feel Better Book for Little Tears by Holly Brochmann and Leah Bowen

Ragtail Remembers: A Story That Helps Children Understand Feelings of Grief by Liz Duckworth

Everybody Feels Sad by Jane Bingham

When I Feel Sad by Cornelia Maude Spelman

The Way I Feel by Janan Cain