

WHY DON'T MY KIDS LOOK LIKE THEY'RE GRIEVING?

When someone who is very important to us dies, our reaction to that loss – our grief – can be overwhelming. The strong feelings that affect us are often so profound and so unfamiliar that we can't imagine anyone else has felt the way we are.

At the same time, in contradiction to this, we can be confused by, and sometimes even grow frustrated with other family members when their grief is expressed in ways we don't understand, when it is different from our own. They might not look like they're grieving at all.

This contrast can be especially noticeable in the differences between adults and children. It's easy to assume that our children should be grieving the same way that we are. But it's important to remember that everyone's grief is unique, and that we all experience and express grief in our own individual ways.

Sometimes we do see children react very strongly to a death. Just as often, however, children give the appearance that nothing has happened in their lives, as if they aren't grieving. It's understandable that we might be concerned about this lack of a visible reaction after a death, especially if we ourselves are experiencing powerful feelings.

This is a concern that we at the Caring Place hear expressed by many of the adults we talk to. The children or teens go on in their lives just like they had before the death. We worry that something is wrong – that their grief is somehow “stuck” inside them. *Isn't that unhealthy?* we wonder. Or, we might also wonder, didn't our children truly love the one who died?

There could be many reasons that we see a child react in this way. Some of these reasons include:

- The child may not yet be able to comprehend that their person is gone – that they are not coming back. The permanence of death is hard for all of us to wrap our minds around. The younger a child is, the more difficult it is for them to comprehend and accept this concept. At some point, however, the permanence of the loss does sink in. During this time, maybe months or even years later, the child may show a much more intense reaction of grief than they ever had before.
- The younger a child is, the harder it is for them to take in the full force of grief all at once. Young children experience grief in

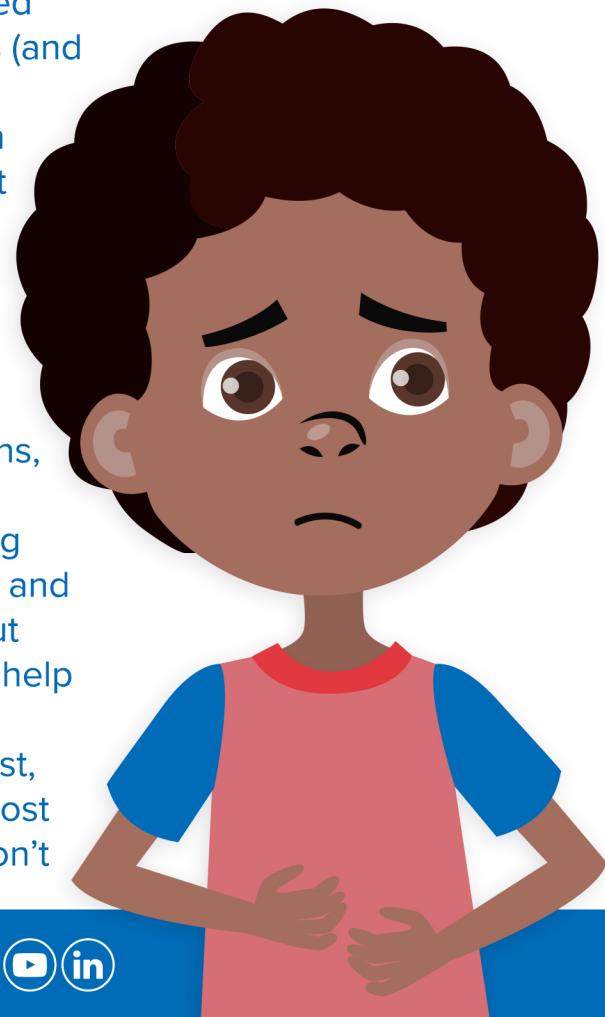


small doses at a time – feeling the grief for a moment, and then going back to what they were doing before. If we're not paying close attention, that small dose of grief might pass by completely unnoticed.

- As mentioned, everyone's grief is unique. Again, the grief of young children will look radically different from a teen's or an adult's grief. Just because it looks different from our own grief doesn't mean it's not there. For a young child, grief may look like regression in behaviors they had already mastered, defiance or aggression, passivity or nonparticipation, or in other actions rather than in crying or in the verbal expression of feelings.
- The child or teen may be experiencing emotions and thoughts and difficulties just as powerful as those we are feeling, but they may not want to make them public. Some people (of any age) are more private with their emotions by nature.
- Or, our child may in fact be expressing their grief outwardly – but just not with us. Many times we at the Caring Place have heard teens, and even younger children, say that they don't want to make their family members sadder than they already are. So they wait until they're with other people they feel safe with, like friends or another adult they trust, to let their feelings out.

Here are some ways to support children after the death of someone important, regardless of how they might be showing their grief:

- Remember, just because we don't see displays of grief doesn't mean it's not there. Our children may be struggling with intense feelings inside, even if those feelings don't show on the outside – or they may be expressed in ways quite different from our own.
- Keep in mind that young children can feel profoundly uneasy after a death, even if they don't have the words to explain what's going on. They need extra support and love in the following weeks and months (and even years), whether they ask for it or not.
- Older children and teens may not want to burden us with their feelings. We can express to them that we will respect their own grief process, but if they want to talk, or cry, or anything else, we will be there for them. We can reassure them that, even if the conversation leads to tears, shared tears can be both a profound way of honoring the one who died, and a chance to come together as a family.
- When children do feel like talking or if they have questions, it's important to give them our undivided attention.
- We can also check in with our children when we're talking with them to make sure that they understand our answers and the meaning we intend. Asking them what they think about something before we provide our own answers can often help us gain insight into their fears or misconceptions.
- Answering children's questions directly, and giving honest, simple, and brief answers to their questions, can be the most helpful way to respond. And remember, it's OK to say "I don't



know,” to a child or teen. As much as they may seek answers, they need our honesty more.

- Repeating the same questions over and over is common for younger children. We need to stay patient with these repetitions – children often repeat their questions because they are trying to understand and make sense of the disruption and confusion in their world. These repeated questions are often one way in which younger children work on understanding that death is permanent.
 - It’s important that we take it seriously when children express fears or worries or anxieties, even when it’s about something that we might consider small. The loss of someone close can be very scary, even for teens. It can take a lot of courage for a child to be vulnerable enough to say that they’re scared. We need to acknowledge all of our children’s feelings without trying to talk them out of those feelings.
 - During this time, we can be especially loving and supportive. Providing lots of emotional, verbal and physical reassurance will help.

Ultimately, when we are able to express our feelings, our questions, our worries – our grief, in other words – all of us of any age are better able to manage and cope with that grief. As adults, we can provide a safe and supportive environment for our children to feel secure enough to express these feelings, questions and worries. The children will take us up on our offers of care when they’re ready.

It’s important to remember that everyone’s grief is unique. That means that everyone has their own timetable for grief; that everyone’s grief looks different; that some people work on their grief much more internally than others; and that some people express their grief out of our sight.

If you have concerns about your child’s grief, you are always welcome to get in touch with us at the Caring Place. Our contact information, as well as other useful resources, can be found throughout our website and on our social media channels.

