

FINDING HOPE

*Helping Children and Teens:
Before and After the Funeral*



Jason Troyer, PhD

GriefPlan.com

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Finding Hope

Helping Children and Teens: Before and After the Funeral

By Jason Troyer, PhD



To the reader,

I wrote this booklet to provide you with information and guidance as you help a grieving child or teenager. Inside you'll find answers to common concerns, descriptions of children's understanding of grief at different ages, suggestions for answering children's questions about death, and other topics. I also offer guidance for determining if a child should attend a funeral and strategies to help make a funeral and other grief rituals as comfortable and meaningful as possible. I have even more information, including recommended books, listed on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

If you find this booklet helpful, please contact the organization that provided it to you and let them know how much you appreciate it. You can ensure that others will receive it in the future just by making a quick call or sending a brief email. I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you assist a grieving child.

Sincerely,

JASON TROYER, PHD

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Finding Hope Helping Children & Teens: Before & After the Funeral
Jason Troyer

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This book is not designed to replace information from a mental health professional or a physician. The reader should consult an appropriate professional in matters relating to his or her physical and emotional health.

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General Advice for Helping Children & Teens

Throughout this booklet, I alternate in describing a child as “he” or “she” to make the reading simpler. To be clear, all of the advice pertains to boys and girls.

Guiding Principles

Below I’ve summarized several general guidelines for helping children following the death of a loved one.



- Always talk with children after a loss and answer their questions honestly. However, never force a child to talk.
 - Allow children to make an informed choice on whether or not to attend a funeral or memorial service; never force a child to attend.
 - Recognize that children have different levels of understanding based on their cognitive development; death is a more complex concept than most adults realize.
- Allowing children to ask questions about death and funeral rituals is important because it will help reveal any myths or misconceptions they may have.
 - Avoid using euphemisms of death that may be confusing including “called home,” “resting,” “sleeping in eternity,” “departed,” “crossed over,” etc. Children are concrete-thinkers and they can easily misunderstand these terms.
 - Children look to adults they trust and respect for guidance on how to grieve. Adults who avoid grieving to be “strong for the child” are teaching a child that it is unacceptable to express feelings of loss.

- Don't expect that you'll have an answer for all the questions children may ask. But don't let the fear of not having an answer keep you from talking and listening to them.



- Normal reactions by grieving children include sadness, shock, yearning, crying, disbelief, distract- edness, insecurity, confusion, vivid dreams/nightmares, guilt, anger, irri- tability, difficulty sleeping, lack of ap- petite, fear, developmental regression (e.g, wetting the bed), self-blame, and many others.
 - A child's continuing connec- tion to the deceased person is often healthy and normal; there is no need to "cut ties" or try to force a child to forget them.
- Children can benefit from planning and participating in meaningful grief rituals.
 - Be patient with children throughout the process of understanding, grieving, and reacting to their loss.
 - There is no set time period for grieving the death of a loved one, but the consequences of a significant loss for children are often experi- enced longer than most people expect.
 - Most children can adjust to the loss of a loved one with the assis- tance of friends and family, but some may benefit from professional assistance.

Talking with Children after a Death

The most important rules for talking with children are: (a) be patient, (b) be compassionate, and (c) provide accurate information.

Be Patient: Grief is a New Experience

Most adults have experienced some type of loss before. Therefore, adults know from experience that grief can be terribly painful, but also know that they typically feel better after some time. Children often don't have this experience from which to draw. A good analogy is the difference in heartache following a teen's first love versus later breakups. The end of your first relationship is often the hardest because it is new and you have never dealt with that kind of loss before. Similarly, children don't yet realize their pain and sadness will eventually be less intense than it is right now. In essence, they have little hope or experience to know they will ever feel better.

Be Compassionate

Children typically have fewer significant relationships than adults. Therefore, if a child's parent, sibling, or grandparent dies, it represents a



major portion of their significant relationships. For example, an adult who loses a parent may be supported by her siblings, her spouse/partner, her children, her friends, her co-workers, etc. Conversely, the typical six year-old child who loses a parent will feel as though there is a major “hole” in her life. Therefore, it is important to recognize that losses for children are more likely to leave gaping holes in their lives, and they have fewer sources of support.

Provide Accurate Information

I am often amazed at the variety of ways well-meaning people insulate children from death. I know this is done with the best of intentions — with the hope that not talking about death will somehow completely shield the child from sadness and grief. Let me be clear: Talk to children about death. Ask them if they have questions and answer them as honestly as you can.

Use words that are clear and concrete. Many adults try to protect children from the topic of death by not using terms such as “dead,” “deceased,” and “died.” Avoiding these words will make it more likely for children to confuse death with sleeping (a common mistake children make) or other concepts. Gently correct children if they are using inaccurate terms (like resting, sleeping, or gone away), but don’t force children to give up softer, yet accurate, words for death like “in heaven” or “passed away.” If you use clear, unambiguous terms, children will eventually adopt them.

Children are curious and will often want to know why or how the person died. It can be helpful to explain, in an age-appropriate way, the reasons why someone died. Always ask children if they have any questions and reassure them that they can come to you with questions later. Again, be sure to use clear terms to avoid unintended misconceptions. For example, if a five-year-old boy’s grandparent died of cancer, you could explain to him that cancer is something inside our bodies that makes us sick. In some cases it can be removed or healed, but sometimes our medicines don’t work and it causes death. Reassure them that not everyone who has cancer dies, but some people do. If you do not provide children with information, they will come up with their own explanations. The child, using his or her “creative logic” may conjure up concepts and causes that are much more traumatic and frightening than the truth.

Key Concepts for Understanding Death

There are several key concepts that are important for children to understand as they grieve the death of a loved one. These concepts include the irreversibility and universality of death, actual causes of death, and the cessation of biological functions at death. The following sections explain each concept and discuss the typical challenges that children of different ages have in understanding death.

Death is Irreversible and Universal

Understanding that death is irreversible and permanent is one of the most important concepts for children to understand. If the child believes that the deceased can return to life, then the child may struggle with questions like:

- When will the deceased come back?
- Why are they choosing to stay away?
- What have I done to make them go away?
- What can I do to convince them to come back?

Not recognizing that death is permanent is why a young boy may ask if his deceased grandmother is coming for Christmas, even though he attended her funeral. This is also why you should never tell a child that a deceased person has “gone away” as if on a trip. Helping children recognize the irreversibility and universality of death is the first step to helping children begin to grieve. After all, they cannot begin to deal with the loss if they believe the deceased may return.

Death Ceases Biological Functions

Related to the concepts of irreversibility and universality is the understanding that biological processes stop when death occurs. In other words, the deceased are not sleeping, nor do they feel hunger, pain, or fear. Children often have the following questions:

- When will they wake up?
- Won't they be hungry?
- Can they breathe in the casket?
- Does death hurt?

This concept may be especially difficult for children to understand because adults often talk about different ways that we continue to have a relationship with the deceased. For example, we may talk about the deceased watching over us or always being with us. While adults understand the differences between the living “being with us” versus the deceased “being with us” — children can easily be confused. I believe it can be comforting to help children understand that they can continue to have a connection with the deceased, but adults must be careful and specific in how they explain that relationship to children.

Understanding the Real Causes of Death

Children, especially younger children, are often confused about what



actually causes death. Because they may not understand the complexities of a stroke, cancer, or heart disease, they often fill in the gaps with their own “logic” — except their logic is frequently flawed. An example of this is when a four-year-old thinks her grandfather died because she cried the last time she was at his house. When

children understand that death is related to the body no longer working, it helps them understand that the deceased didn’t choose to die or didn’t purposely leave them. (This becomes less clear in cases of suicide).

Try to explain the cause of death in terms the child will understand and dispel any misconceptions the child may have about the death being their fault. Furthermore, using clear terms such as “died” and “dead” instead of ambiguous or unclear terms such as “crossed over” or “gone away” will reduce the chance of confusion for the child. Children and teens of all ages can benefit from books that discuss death in age-appropriate terms. Check inside the front and back covers of this booklet and on my website (booksongrief.com) for recommended books and reviews.

Understanding Death at Different Ages

A child's ability to understand the concepts of irreversibility and universality of death, causes of death, and the cessation of biological functions at death typically improves at certain developmental milestones. Below I describe the typical level of understanding that children and teens have at specific ages. These age groups are general guidelines and each child's understanding of death and reactions will vary.

Preschoolers (0-3 years old)

If a child is old enough to develop a relationship then the child is old enough to feel loss. Children of this age have little understanding of the concept of death. Specifically, children will not understand that death is irreversible, universal, and that there are a variety of causes of death. It is normal to have to frequently repeat your explanations for why the child can no longer play with or see the deceased loved one, and some children of this age will not fully understand these concepts until they are older. It is normal for children to express grief in their play, including pretending the deceased is still alive.

Most of the distress experienced by children of this age group comes from the disruption in their routines and recognizing suffering in others. Even children younger than one-year old can sense when there is stress and discord in their environment. This is not to suggest that young children should be shielded from others' grief reactions. However, maintaining some routines is especially helpful for young children.



Young Children (4-8 years old)

This is the age range when children begin to understand the irreversibility and universality of death. Many four-year-olds will struggle with these concepts while most eight-year-olds will understand them. However, many children in this age range may continue to believe that death is tied to their actions or thoughts. Death may seem arbitrary or haphazard to them, so they are trying to determine why some people die while others don't. As a result of their confusion, they may use incorrect logic (often in a self-blaming way) to make sense of death.

Children may express grief reactions (including sadness, confusion, anger, etc.) through play. They may also include funerals or other death rituals in their play. This allows a child to have control of the event and their reaction to it. These are normal reactions, especially after attending a funeral or other death ritual.



Pre-Teens (9-12 years old)

By this age children will understand that death is permanent, irreversible, and ends biological functions. They often have many questions about the physical processes of death, different causes of death, and the rationale behind various grief rituals. Their concerns often include more complicated questions involving beliefs about what happens after death. Children at this age have a more sophisticated understanding of various beliefs regarding death, and their questions will begin to include more abstract concepts.

This is also the age when children's questions may be related to the broader implications of death. For example, an eleven-year-old may ask, "Will we have to move?" or "Will we lose all our money?" after her father dies.

Teens (13-18 years old)

Teens will have a good understanding of the basic concepts of death. However, the typical cognitive processes and challenges that teens face may also be reflected in their grief. For example, they may focus so much on their own grief that they don't recognize others are also grieving. An outcome of this is that teens may view their own grief as something that others have never experienced. Just as they may believe that the anguish of their first breakup is a unique experience, they may believe the heart-ache of their loss is also distinctive.

While teens are capable of abstract reasoning, they may still reason in a very black/white or right/wrong style. Therefore teens may be unable to see multiple perspectives regarding a loss and may believe there are clear right or wrong ways to mourn. Teens also place a high value on "being real" and honesty. Teens may be angry if they believe adults are not being honest or are hiding their grief.

Teens are able to understand the importance of finding meaning in loss — although they may not use those words to describe the process. They are more likely to see the benefit of more complex grief rituals, including writing letters to the deceased, volunteering in memory of the deceased, and recognizing the various ways they may have an ongoing connection to the deceased.

Revisiting Grief Throughout Childhood

Children may re-experience grief in various ways as they grow older. As their ability to reason becomes more complex and their life circumstances change, they will recognize new losses. For example, a 16-year-old whose mother died when she was 8 may find herself missing her mother's advice and companionship as she begins dating. A 9-year-old who is completing a family history project may be frustrated that he doesn't have more memories of his sibling who died when he was 2. This process is a challenging, although normal, aspect of grief.

Before the Funeral

The information in this section is also applicable to visitations, burial services, cremation ceremonies, scattering of ashes, and related events.

Making an Informed Choice

A common question following a death is whether or not children should attend and participate in death rituals including the funeral, visitation, and other events. I believe children should be involved in death rituals because they aid in grief. However, I do not believe children should be forced to participate in any specific event. Therefore, I recommend the following process:

- 1) Tell the child what will happen at the event (e.g., funeral, visitation, internment, etc.).
- 2) Allow the child to make a guilt-free, informed choice about whether or not to participate.
- 3a) If the child chooses to participate, prepare and guide them through the event.
- 3b) If the child chooses not to participate, find other ways they can be involved in private rituals.

Accurate Information is Key

Children must have accurate information about what will happen at a funeral in order to make an informed decision. Many well-meaning adults ask a child if they'd like to attend a funeral, but the child is usually basing his or her decision on funerals he or she saw on television, movies, or something they experienced at Halloween. It's no wonder some children are especially terrified of funerals.

Let's use an example of a 6-year old girl whose grandmother has just died. You can begin with an overview of what the funeral will look like and the sequence of events. If possible, offer to take her to the location of the funeral beforehand and show her the room. Describe what she would be doing if she were to attend. It is often helpful to proactively dispel common myths about funerals and other events. For example, it can be helpful to tell her that she will not be required to touch the

deceased or do anything else she doesn't want to do. Be sure to avoid pressuring the child into attending by saying things like, "It's up to you, but I know your mother would really be proud of you," or "Big girls do things like this," etc.

Only after the child has received a realistic idea of what a funeral or similar event entails can she make an informed decision about whether or not to attend. But this is only one way that a child can participate in a funeral or similar ritual. Regardless of whether or not a child plans to attend the public service (e.g., visitation, funeral, etc.), she can still participate in private rituals (see "If a Child Decides Not to Attend the Funeral).



If They Choose to Attend the Funeral

After a child has made an informed decision to attend the funeral, there are several things that parents and other adults can do to make the event as beneficial as possible.

Pair the child with a responsible adult with whom he feels safe

This adult will be with the child throughout the service. A child should always be allowed to leave the service if he is feeling overwhelmed. This adult should be someone who can leave with the child in this situation.

Provide the child an opportunity to view the body or the chapel/facility before the event

If the deceased's body will be present at the funeral, a child may need more time to warm up to the idea of seeing a deceased family member. Allowing the child a no-pressure opportunity to view the body and facility where the event will be held can ease her fears and allow her to move at her own pace.

Determine the extent to which the child wants to participate

If a child decides to attend the funeral, it is important to determine the ways she wants to participate. She may decide that she wants to attend, but not participate in any way — and that is fine. Other children may decide that they want to participate in some way. Again, a child should never be pressured to attend a funeral and should certainly never be pressured to participate. However, some children will want to “do something” as a way to show their love for the deceased. Adults should provide the child with different types of opportunities to participate. The section “Expressing Loss and Love” describes examples of rituals in which the child can participate.

If They Choose Not to Attend the Funeral

If the child decides that he does not want to attend the funeral, there are still several things you can do to assist him. First, reassure the child that his choice not to attend the funeral does not reflect his love for the deceased. Furthermore, do not let others shame the child for not attending. Ask the child if he would like to attend a private viewing or some other type of private ceremony. Just because a child does not want to attend the public funeral doesn't mean he wants to avoid all aspects of the funeral. There are many ways for a child to participate in post-funeral rituals. The section “Expressing Loss and Love” describes several different things a child can do instead of attending a funeral.

Common Grief Reactions

Children and Teenagers may have a wide variety of reactions to the death of a loved one. Furthermore, their reactions will likely vary over the weeks, months, and years following the death. Here are several common grief reactions they may have:

- Sadness & Crying
- Guilt & Self Blame
- Anxiousness
- Loneliness & Yearning
- Anger & Irritability
- Fatigue & Lack of Energy
- Insomnia & Restlessness
- Developmental Regression (e.g., wetting the bed, sucking thumb, etc)
- Forgetful & Absentminded
- Lack of appetite
- Dreams about the deceased
- Repeating the same questions



Normal Grief Reactions by Children and Teens

Parents and other adults may forget that children have a different relationship with the deceased than they do. Children tend to grieve based on the experienced closeness, not expected closeness with the deceased. Children, especially younger children, live in a very concrete world. Therefore, their most significant relationships are those that are present in their daily lives. This explains why they may grieve the death of their hamster more intensely than a grandparent they only see a few times a year. Don't expect a child to grieve a person just because they are a relative. A child may not be too upset about Great Aunt Sally's death because he can hardly remember the one time he met her.

Sadness

Children and teens typically express sadness after the death of a close loved one. However, their expression of sadness can take different forms. In addition to being communicated through tears, children’s sadness may also be expressed privately, through play, or through frustration or anger. Support the child or teen as they express sadness and reinforce that it is a normal and healthy process. On the other hand, don’t compel them to be sad simply because you think they should be. Children will typically express their own grief reactions in their own time and style. Simply remind the child that you are open to listening to any questions they may have and supporting them as they need it.

Fear & Insecurity

Children thrive on routines; few events cause more disruption to routines of children than the death of an important adult. Children often respond to major disruptions in their lives with feelings of fear and insecurity. The greater the disruption, the more likely the child is to experience these reactions. Therefore, fear and insecurity are especially common after the death of a parent (or parent-like person) or a sibling. Fear and insecurity may be expressed as anxiousness, being “clingy,” checking on adults to make sure they are there, and having difficulty saying goodbye in everyday situations (e.g., leaving for school, etc.).



As much as possible, attempt to continue some routines. If a child is accustomed to reading with an adult before bed, try to maintain this. When a routine must be changed, explain why and ask for the child's input on how to make the new routine feel more familiar.

Anger & Acting Out

Grief, especially in children or teens, can often be communicated as anger, frustration, or irritability. Some of this is a result of wanting to blame someone for the loss. For other children this may be a result of not having the language or opportunity to express grief. Don't be surprised if children or teens have more tantrums, disobey, or misbehave in other ways. The best approach is to maintain most rules, but with an added dose of patience and compassion. Allowing children to misbehave, especially over a long period of time, simply because they experienced a loss is not helpful. Try to be consistent, yet flexible.

Guilt & Self-Blame

Children often feel guilty following the death of a loved one. Many times this is a result of the child feeling responsible for the death. Children, especially younger children, often mistakenly assign cause-effect relationships when there is actually no connection. For example, a four-year-old may mistakenly think her father died because she didn't pick up her room.

It can be difficult for children to let go of their sense of responsibility for the death. Frequently reassuring the child that her actions had nothing to do with her loved one's death is the best remedy. If appropriate, it may be helpful to discuss the actual cause of death. (See "Key Concepts for Understanding Death")

Expressing Loss and Love

In this section, I will describe examples of public and private rituals in which children may be involved. I use the term “rituals” to signify any action a bereaved person may use to express respect, remembrance, or admiration. These actions do not need to be religious, although they may be. Rituals can be helpful for any grieving person, but can be especially helpful for children. This is due to children having more difficulty putting their reactions, thoughts, and feelings into words. Through rituals a child can more easily express her grief reactions.

Regardless of a child’s choice to attend or not attend a public service, all children should have the opportunity to participate in rituals. Most of the examples involve ways a child can participate without speaking to large groups of people. These can be particularly helpful for children who decide not to attend a funeral to feel as if they are still participating in some way.

Rituals for Children

BEFORE AND DURING THE FUNERAL

- Help select pictures or items for a memorial display
- Share stories about the deceased. Ask the child’s permission to share the story at the funeral.
- Attend a private or family viewing
- Be a pallbearer (or honorary pallbearer)
- Spread dirt on the casket at internment
- Release balloons
- Create, color, or draw something that is meaningful to the child. The item or picture can be placed in the casket, burned in the cremation process, or placed in an album.

AFTER THE FUNERAL

- Create a photo album, video, song compilation, or memory box

- Visit the gravesite or other places of significance
- Give the child items associated with the deceased (a watch, pocket-knife, jewelry, wallet, items of clothing, etc.)
- Provide a journal to record their thoughts, feelings, and reactions
- Do something in memory of the deceased (e.g., fundraiser, an activity the deceased liked, etc.)

Does the Child or Teen Need Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance for a child or teen if you think it would be helpful to them. Professional counseling services are not only for individuals who are mentally ill or “crazy.” They are designed to help anyone with a psychological concern. Although grief counseling is not a magic potion or a cure for grief, it can be helpful by providing children with a safe place to share their concerns.



*Signs a Child or Teen May Need Professional Help**

- Grief has not lessened (or has gotten worse) after several months or a year
- Feelings of guilt or anger have not diminished
- Unable to say their loved one’s name or won’t allow others to talk about them
- Grief, depression, or anxiety that impairs their schoolwork or relationships with others
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide (*Always seek help in these situations*)
- Use of alcohol or illegal substances
- New behavior problems that persist or get worse

**All of these signs (with the exceptions of thoughts of self-harm or substance abuse) refer to the child or teen several months after the loss — not immediately after the loss death.*

Common Questions About Grief

This section covers some of the most common questions about grief including the Stages of Grief, the lengths of grief, achieving closure, grieving “correctly,” and dealing with unusual experiences.

What About the Stages of Grief?

The most widely known theory of grief is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s Stages of Grief. Her stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, have been frequently depicted in television shows and movies. Given that the Stages of Grief are so commonly discussed, most people assume they are the “right” way to grieve, but this is incorrect. Research and professional experience support the view that grief reactions are very individualized — they do not follow one pattern. So don’t be worried if a child doesn’t experience denial or feel angry. Each child’s process of grief is unique, and you shouldn’t try to match their reactions to any specific stage of grief.

How Long Should Grief Last?

Many people expect grief to be something you “get over” in a matter of weeks. In fact, grief may last a year or more and many people feel grief even longer than that. Most children’s grief will eventually lessen, but they may also feel that a part of them is always grieving the loss.

A child’s grief reaction will be most influenced by the closeness of the relationship and the impact on a child’s daily life. Although most children report they are feeling better several months to several years after the loss, this does not mean that grief necessarily follows a pattern of improving each day. Grief may peak a few months following a death due to the loss of support over time. Some children continue to feel intense grief, especially following the death of a parent or sibling. Indeed, many well-meaning friends and family members may suggest that a child’s grief should be over within a few months. This isn’t necessarily true.

Furthermore, most bereaved children will have “grief bursts” — moments or days when their grief is especially painful. These bursts of grief may be due to significant days (e.g., child or deceased’s birthday, holidays,

mother's/father's day, etc.) or other random reminders. These "bad days" can also be a result of a new realization or a new "first." For example, a child may have a grief burst on the day they announce the upcoming father/daughter dance and she wonders who will go with her. Grief bursts are a normal, although painful, part of grief. Most importantly, experiencing them does not mean that a child is regressing or that she is not grieving correctly.

Do Children and Teenagers Have to Forget Their Loved Ones?

There is a longstanding grief myth that it is necessary to eventually "let go" or forget the deceased. We now know that this is not a healthy and adaptive way to grieve. Instead, it is healthy and normal to maintain some "continuing bonds" with the deceased after death. These bonds may include thinking and dreaming about the deceased, talking to them and about them, visiting a gravesite or special place, and other ways of feeling connected to them. Helping children develop and maintain these connections can be an important part of the grief process, as long as they balance them with continuing to love those who are still living.



A Final Word of Hope

Helping a grieving child can be challenging and heartbreaking. I hope this booklet has provided you with information and guidance. I want to remind you that children's grief takes many different forms and it may resurface at seemingly random times. Be honest, patient, and compassionate as the child deals with this new reality. Eventually it will get easier for the child and for you.

My hope is that you and the bereaved child in your life are surrounded by support and love as you grieve and that eventually the happy memories endure longer than the sad ones.

With sincerest condolences,

JASON TROYER, PHD

www.GriefPlan.com



About the Author



Dr. Jason Troyer is the creator of [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com). In his professional experience as a therapist, grief researcher, and professor, he discovered that grieving people wanted a plan to help them on their grief journey. His GriefPlan Programs include videos, information, activities, writing prompts, and other tools to guide people to heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. Dr. Troyer also offers 1-on-1 GriefPlan Coaching for those who want additional help. He provides engaging presentations and workshops on a variety of grief-related topics. Dr. Troyer earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology and masters in Counseling. You can contact Dr. Troyer at [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com).

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Feeling Lost & Stuck in Your Grief?



I guide you through a plan to heal, remember, & rebuild after loss

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