# Helping Children in Grief: Understanding Childhood Bereavement

(From the Crossroads Hospice Charitable Foundation)

After the death of a loved one, [adults tend to overlook the effects of loss on children](https://crhcf.org/Crossroads-Kids/). The grief and emotional state of children during this difficult time can be left unconsidered, as the significant adults in children’s lives are dealing with their own grief, handling their waves of emotions and learning how to cope.

Adults and children grieve differently, and the grief of children can take many different forms based on the child’s current age and developmental level. By understanding how children perceive death, how they might react, and how you can help, you can provide a safe environment for a child to grieve and begin to heal.

**Physical reassurance and a maintenance of routine are key when comforting an infant after a loss.**

**Infancy: Children 0 to 2 Years Old**

Children up to 2 years old have no concept of death; however, this does not mean that they do not feel the [**impact of a loved one’s death**](https://crhcf.org/insights/love-is-always-the-answer-what-really-matters-in-life/). Children at this age will feel the change in routine that occurs within the family, the absence of the loved one, and sense the shift in emotional tone within the household.

**Emotional state of infants while grieving**

While infants won’t be able to articulate their feelings verbally, nor understand their feelings, they may feel:

* Fear of being abandoned by other significant adults
* Longing for the touch, sight, smell, and sounds of the deceased loved one

**Behaviors that signal grief in infants**

It is common for children of this age to search for the deceased loved one in the home and feel continuous anxiety when unable to find them. The sudden change that death brings may lead to the following behavior:

* Sleeplessness
* Sudden sickliness
* Biting
* Constant crying

**How to comfort grieving infants**

Physical reassurance and maintaining a normal routine are key when comforting an infant after a loss. While it is vital that you also tend to your personal grief, the following can help the infant during this difficult time:

* Engaging in physical contact, cuddling, and communicating only in soft-spoken, comforting tones
* Exercising patience and understanding at the increase in crying
* Maintaining the child’s normal routine as best as possible to reinforce stability

**Preschool: Children 2 to 6 Years Old**

At this age, the world is understood in only a very literal sense. What causes death is unknown and children may interpret death as a form of sleeping or a kind of temporary absence. It is important to avoid euphemisms and answer questions with brief, honest answers.

**Emotional state of preschool-age children while grieving**

Preschool-age children may struggle to understand the meaning of the absence of the loved one, but keenly feel the pain of the separation. Their grief may be expressed through:

* Confusion surrounding the concept of death and absence of the loved one
* Anger at the loved one that “abandoned” them
* Fearfulness over whether other significant adults will soon die

**Behaviors that signal grief in preschoolers**

While preschoolers are able to understand more of the concepts surrounding death than infants, the confusion, anxiety, and fear they may feel after the loss of a loved one may lead to behavior such as:

* Repetitive questions surrounding death, dying, and what happens to the deceased
* Regression into behaviors such as thumb sucking and bed wetting
* Intense, frightening dreams
* Increased aggression and outbursts of hitting or yelling

**How to comfort grieving preschoolers**

At this age, you can begin to comfort children through conversation as well as action. Patience and an understanding of the confusion they face are key in providing comfort for preschool-age children.

* Allow the child to regress into previous behavior.
* Give honest and simple answers to the questions and fears the child expresses.
* Encourage the child to play and engage in the [**fun activities**](https://crhcf.org/insights/how-arts-and-crafts-help-children-express-grief/) they enjoyed before the loved one’s death.
* Allow the child to cry and make it known that it is okay to express any and all feelings.

**School Age: Children 6 to 8 Years Old**

School-age children begin to grasp the finality and biological meaning of death. In addition to understanding the [**physical meaning of death**](https://crhcf.org/insights/five-physical-signs-that-death-is-nearing/), children of this age often begin asking questions concerning what happens after a loved one dies.

**Emotional state of school-age children while grieving**

Within this age and developmental range, the emotions of children mature, and the range of emotions they may feel significantly deepens. This is often an age where many questions about life and death first abound, as children, in their grief, feel:

* Guilt over the death of the loved one, as the child may fear their thought or conversation with the loved one caused the loved one to die
* Loneliness after the passing of the loved one
* Fear for the life of parents or other significant adults

**Behaviors that signal grief in school-age children**

As children in this age and developmental range have an increased depth and complexity of emotions, so too do their behaviors in grief grow in depth and complexity. When a school-age child experiences loss, be mindful of:

* Sudden decline in grades and overall performance at school
* Increased aggression and violent behavior toward others
* Withdrawal from others and hiding away feelings
* Difficulty concentrating at school and home

**How to comfort grieving school-age children**

At this age, children are better able to express how they feel after the death of a loved one. Adults and children can begin discussing and exploring fears, sadness, and uncertainties that surround death and what brings comfort after the loss of a loved one. In addition to encouraging the sharing of thoughts and emotions, the following can help your school-age child begin to heal after a loss:

* Promote drawing, reading, sports, or any other activity that the child enjoys
* Hug, hold, and cuddle to help reinforce closeness, love, and stability.
* Answer questions honestly and without the use of euphemisms that commonly surround conversations about death with children.
* Encourage the expression of feelings through verbal, artistic, or physical outlets.

**Pre-Adolescents: Children 8 to 12 Years Old**

Nearing adolescence, children begin forming concrete concepts about life, and their cognitive abilities begin to advance rapidly. Self-confidence begins to develop as children more frequently socialize and form more personal opinions about the world around them.

**Emotional state of pre-adolescent children while grieving**

At this age and developmental stage, the impact of grief becomes compounded. Being now more socially involved, children are dealing with their own feelings of grief and loss, but also weigh the social implications of their expressed emotions, leading to feelings of:

* Vulnerability and a sense of anxiety around peers
* Loneliness and a fear of being isolated from their normal social groups
* [**Anger and sadness**](https://crhcf.org/insights/understanding-the-anger-caused-by-grief/) upon the realization that the deceased loved one will not be present for future life milestones.

**Behaviors that signal grief in pre-adolescent children**

As pre-adolescent children gain a more comprehensive understanding of the physical realities and finality of death, questions about the death of a loved one may grow more complex. In addition, children at this age have school and social interactions becoming a bigger part of their lives. At this stage, behavior that signals grief includes:

* Desire for discussions concerning the deceased loved one’s specific cause of death
* Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities or social connections
* Wildly fluctuating moods and more aggressive behavior at school and home

**How to comfort pre-adolescent children in grief**

Understanding the new social pressures that pre-adolescents face, combined with the general distress and emotional hardship of grief that we all endure is key in helping children in grief. You can help them by:

* Understanding, expecting, and accepting the mood swings that will accompany this time of grief and mourning
* Offering open conversation and honest discussion about the life and death of the deceased loved one
* Allowing regressive behavior to occur, as it is natural during the grieving process
* Encouraging play and the use of writing, art, music, or physical activity as an outlet

**Adolescents: Children 12 to 18 Years Old**

As children enter into this stage of age and development, their understanding of the universality of death is solidly formed. The development of spiritual concepts may begin to take root as a means of coping and as a tool to help stave off fears of their own death later in life.

**Emotional state of adolescents while grieving**

The desire to be in control is paramount during this stage as social fears are greatly enhanced and anxiety surrounding the appearance of weakness abounds. While grieving, adolescents may feel:

* Fearful of being perceived as different or weak within their social circles
* Shocked and in denial about the loved one’s death
* Worried about the death of other loved ones now that the fragility and uncertainty of life are recognized

**Behaviors that signal grief within adolescents**

With heightened social pressures and the pressure of school surrounding them, adolescents can exhibit a broad range of emotions and behaviors while coping with loss. Be mindful of sudden changes in behavior that signal the need for support and compassion from a loving adult:

* Sudden changes in eating habits
* Participation in dangerous, high-risk, and even deadly behavior
* Bursts of aggression that lead to physical conflict, screaming, and arguing
* Withdrawal from social groups and aversion to peer interaction
* Sudden difficulties at school and difficulties concentrating
* Extreme depression, including suicidal thoughts or actions

**If your child expresses suicidal thoughts or behaviors, contact their pediatrician immediately and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**

**CALL THE NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE: 1-800-273-8255**

[**NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE WEBSITE: SUICIDEPREVENTIONLIFELINE.ORG**](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/)

**How to comfort adolescents in grief**

At this stage in life, children, now nearing adulthood, may begin leaning on the support of their peers and relate more closely to their friends. As children look more outward for comfort and support, you can [**continue to be there for them**](https://crhcf.org/insights/being-a-healing-presence/) by:

* Encouraging verbalization of feelings
* Being available for guidance when they need you and when they’re ready to talk
* Allowing them to be in control of how they experience and grow from their grief

**Supporting Children on the Grief Journey**

While grief may take many forms for children depending on age and developmental level, there is one constant that remains: the need for an adult who takes the time to listen, explain, and offer unconditional love. By having a deeper understanding of where your child may be on their grief journey, you can extend your arms and your heart toward them in earnest and offer them the loving support needed to learn and heal after the loss of a loved one.

**Source:** **Crossroads Hospice Charitable Foundation**, <https://crhcf.org/insights/helping-children-in-grief-understanding-childhood-bereavement/>, published March 31, 2016