



Helping Children Navigate Grief

The Five Stages of Grief*

- **Denial:** “This can’t be happening.”
- **Anger:** “Why me? Is there someone to blame?”
- **Bargaining:** “If this does not happen, I will ___ in return.”
- **Depression:** “I am too upset to do my regular routines.”
- **Acceptance:** “I have made peace with this.”

**These are common phases, but every child experiences grief differently.*

Source: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Tips for Talking about Loss:

- **Be Honest:** Do not use only vague terms. Many children, in particular older children, want appropriate details so that they are not left to fill in the blanks on their own.
- **Be Clear and Direct:** Don’t tiptoe around the truth. Children prefer terms like “died” when adults might use terms like “is no longer with us.” Meet children where they are by using their language.
- **Model:** Children are watching you now more than ever to see how to cope with their feelings. Without scaring them, share how you are feeling during this shared loss or, if the loss is uniquely theirs, how you felt during a similar experience, as well as how you cope(d). Example: “I am feeling sad that I won’t get to see Mr. Lee again. I am going to take some deep breaths to calm myself down, then make a list of all the things I loved about him so I can remember him always.”
- **Listen:** Give children a chance to ask questions. If you are in a classroom setting and are worried about appropriateness, having them ask you one-on-one or in writing may be best. Their questions may not be what you expect; answer them anyway.
- **Give Outlets for Expression:** Here, choices are key. Some children may prefer to draw how they are feeling, others may prefer to write about it, and others may choose to listen to an age-appropriate story about loss. There is no wrong answer other than ignoring children’s feelings and trying to sweep them under the rug.
- **Choose an Appropriate Ritual:** It is important for children to have a way to signify closure in the form of a ritual. Depending on the loss, this may look like attending a memorial service, drawing a picture, planting a tree, lighting a candle, having a class conversation, or doing something more specific to the situational context. Keep in mind that some children will not be comfortable participating; do not force them to do so.