

SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENS WHEN AN EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBER DIES



If you know a child or teen who is grieving the death of a grandparent, auntie, tío, or other extended family member, you might be wondering, “What do i say? How can i help?”

Here are a few basic principles to keep in mind.

Access support for yourself

If you are parenting or supporting a grieving child, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them you will have the energy and presence to be there for them. Think about ways to support your physical, emotional, and mental health. Ideas include: getting quality sleep, eating nourishing food, moving your body, attending a support group, talking with a therapist, connecting with friends, writing/listening to podcasts, getting outside, setting boundaries (it's okay to say “no”), asking for help, practicing self-compassion, and anything else that works for you.

Talk openly and honestly about the death

After a death, one of the first questions is: “How and when do I tell my children?” There is no magical ‘right time,’ but in general we recommend telling them as soon as possible, so that they hear it from someone they trust. Start with a short, simple explanation, using words that line up with their developmental level and then let their questions guide what else to share.

Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they can confuse children. Here are some examples of how to share the news: “Honey, I have really sad news, grandpa died last night. His heart stopped working and the doctors couldn’t fix it.” “Grandma died of suicide, do you know what that means?” “Poppa died of an illness called cancer.” “Nana died. She took too many pills and they made her body stop working.” For more specific language, please visit the Tip Sheets pages at dougycenter.org.

Listen

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, or try to fix their feelings. What’s more helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or minimizing. When children trust you will listen and understand, they’ll be more likely to come to you when they’re hurting or needing advice.

Be open to different ways of grieving

Grief looks different for everyone. Some children may cry quietly and want to be left alone. Others might have difficulty sitting still or being by themselves.



Some children may not outwardly show reactions at all, or their grief comes out as over-performing and striving. You can help by letting them know that all of their thoughts, feelings, and reactions are okay, as long as their behavior does not hurt themselves or anyone else.

Provide consistency and routine

Life is often in upheaval after a death, so finding ways to create safety and predictability is helpful. Children might also need flexibility, so avoid being rigid about routines. Since you are likely also grieving, reassure children that no matter what, someone will be there to help with cooking, homework, chores, and other daily routines.

Offer choices

Children appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. Allowing them to make choices in grief can help re-establish a sense of power, control, and trust. These choices can be simple and everyday such as, “Do you want to wear your red or purple t-shirt?” They can also be more complex, such as participating in the memorial service or sorting through the person’s belongings. Providing informed choices helps them know they’re valued and an important part of the family.

Get creative

While some children will talk about their experiences, many will express themselves through art, writing, music, or creative play. You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of pictures, or writing a letter, but be open to their ideas too. Some children are drawn to physical activity so create time and space for them to engage in big energy play like running outside, sports, and messy creative projects.

Talk about and remember the person who died

Talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. You might say, “Your grandmother Rosa really liked this song,” or, “Your Uncle Daunte made the best ribs I’ve ever had.”



By sharing stories, you give children permission to share their feelings and memories. If talking about the person sparks emotions and tears for you, you don’t have to hide them from your children, but it’s helpful to reassure them they didn’t do or say anything to cause those emotions. “Sometimes I cry when I think about Nana, but I’m okay. Later I’m going to listen to my favorite song because it helps me feel better.”

Get extra help if needed

While most children and teens ultimately return to their prior level of functioning following a death, some are potentially at risk for developing challenges such as depression, difficulties at school, or anxiety. If you notice ongoing behaviors that interfere with your child’s daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don’t be afraid to ask professionals about their experience and training in grief and loss, working with children, and their treatment philosophy and methods.

These are just a few tips for supporting children and teens when an extended family member dies. Grief is unique for everyone and every family, so be sure to adapt these suggestions as needed.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Our Mission

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 60,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

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