

BELOVED COMMUNITY & GRIEF

**Tips for supporting children
when someone dies**



Thank you for making time to read this Tip Sheet and for wanting to support a child in your life who is grieving.

Whether you're a parent, grandparent, caregiver, teacher, coach, faith leader, or family friend, the Tips provided here are offered to help you navigate how to best support a child who is grieving the death of a family member or friend. This resource is a collaboration between KairosPDX, an educational non-profit and community based school focused on transforming education through a model built on love and inclusion, that elevates the voices of historically underserved youth, their families, and their communities, and Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children & Families, a non-profit, that provides peer grief support groups for children, teens, young adults, and their adult family members grieving a death or diagnosis of an advanced serious illness.

Dr. Tashel Bordere studies the cumulative effects of grief, gun violence, and racial trauma on Black youth and through her research has identified the concept of suffocated grief. While most grief goes

unacknowledged in our society, for Black youth and youth with other marginalized identities, their normal and natural grief responses are often punished or penalized. (Bordere, 2019). Suffocated grief is one result of historic and ongoing racism, which has also resulted in higher rates of death and early death in the Black community, including from the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Given these realities for Black youth and youth with other marginalized identities who are grieving, we offer these tips to ensure that their grief, and the grief of their family members is not only acknowledged but actively supported. These Tips are just the beginning, so please reach out to either of our organizations for more ideas and resources.

Dougy Center: One of the things we've learned over the years from children and families is how important it is to be honest about the death. As adults, we often want to protect children by not telling them how someone died or that they died at all, but talking openly about the death is one way to help them start to process the loss — and to trust that the adults in their lives will be

honest, even about hard things. We usually recommend that parents and caregivers give a short explanation of what happened, using language that works for their child's developmental level, and then ask, "What questions do you have?" We also encourage adults to be concrete and clear about what it means to die. Here's an example, "Honey, I have some sad news, Daddy died this morning. He had something called a heart attack. The doctors tried to fix his heart, but they weren't able to and he died. When someone dies, their body stops working, they no longer need to eat, sleep, or go to the bathroom." It's helpful for adults to give clear explanations about what it means when someone dies before talking about the spiritual meaning. "In our family, we believe that when someone dies, their spirit/soul..." This helps younger children distinguish between what happens to our bodies versus our essences/spirit/soul.

What are some ways you'd encourage families to share the news that someone died?

KairosPDX: We agree sharing the honest truth that a death has happened in our life is the best place to start. This will open up the conversation in a way that the child can process it at their own pace. It takes time for the news to sink in. So, it's helpful to remember to respect the brilliance of children and follow their lead on what they need next. When you share the news, try to do it in a safe place with people the child feels safe with. Let them know we are in this together and while the grief they go through will be their own, they aren't in it alone. After you share the news and answer questions, ask what they might need next — it could be a chance to express themselves through art, reading, music, play, or connecting with someone they care about.



Dougy Center: Another common question adults and caregivers have when it comes to children and grief is, "What's 'normal' in grief?" Our belief is that grief is a natural response to any type of loss. It's not something that needs to be fixed or gotten over. What grief looks like can be as unique as each person and the relationship they have with the person who died. Even within a family, people might respond very differently to the death of the same person. One child might want to look at photos and tell stories with the family, while their sibling might be more private and prefer to journal or talk with their friends. Grief is also so much more than just emotions. It can affect children physically (stomachaches, headaches, feeling tired, feeling wound up), spiritually (why me/why my family? questioning or growing stronger in their faith tradition), cognitively (hard to concentrate, need a lot of reminders), behaviorally (asking for attention/reassurance, having a lot of big energy), and socially (feeling disconnected from friends or like "no one gets it").

How do you see grief show up for the children you work with?

KairosPDX: It's true that grief shows up in a lot of ways and it's important to remember



that emotional expressions are points of connection, not to be feared or seen as bad. Grief can come out as anger, distractibility, and uncertainty around how they are supposed to feel or act. You might see them trying to have some control over their life by not being flexible. They might seem shut down or distant from people. It's true that grief can be tiring, but it's also important to acknowledge that for Black youth the exhaustion is compounded by the grief of seeing or hearing about members of the Black community who die or are killed. It's an added weight to the grief they are already carrying about the person in their life. So, their grief is often layered — it can be about the person in their life who died, but also all the other deaths they might hear about or see on the news.

At KairosPDX, we use the framework of Zones of Regulation — Green, Yellow, Red, and Blue — to help identify emotions. Green is calm and good spirits. Yellow is anxious or worried. Red is angry or mad. Blue is sad or withdrawn. When it comes to grief, children will be all over these zones. They might stay in red and green for a week, blue for half a day, and green the next. It's not linear. You

can help children identify what zone they are in and use a strategy to help them move into the green zone, when they are ready. You can find lots of information about these Zones and strategies on the internet.

Dougy Center: One thing people often want to know is “How long is grief supposed to last?” Children and adults often feel pressure from others who ask, “Are you still grieving?” or “Why aren't they over it yet?” In reality, grief doesn't have a timeline. There are no specific steps to follow or stages to move through, and if someone is thinking about and missing the person who died two, 10, or 30 years later, it doesn't mean something's wrong. We know from the children and families we work with that as a child grows up, they will likely revisit the loss as they reach different milestones like graduating, getting their first job, moving into their own place, or any other major change.

How can families help children know grief isn't something they have to “get over?”

KairosPDX: Sharing stories and mementos of the person is a good way to help children know it's okay to remember and keep talking about the person. We know how important it is to give back to our communities while we are alive and talking about the person's legacy is a way to keep doing that even after they die. Even though the person's body has died, their love and their values live on with us. You can reassure children that this isn't something they ever have to get over, they can keep missing the person for the rest of their life. There are lots of opportunities to carry on their legacy. For example, if a child's parent dies their freshman year of high school, they might be thinking about how that person won't be there when they graduate. You can help them rewrite the script for

that graduation by finding ways to honor that person and keep their memory close — maybe by carrying a photo or sharing a quote from them.

We also know that children are inherently creative and imaginative. You can ask them if there's something they want to create to carry on the memory of the person like a video, photo album, music playlist, or anything else they come up with.

Dougy Center: Okay, so we've talked a bit about how grief shows up for children and how their grief might be expressed, but what about how to best support them in that expression? We talk a lot with families about the importance of re-establishing a sense of safety after someone dies. Ways to do that might include answering their questions honestly, making room for their thoughts and emotions without jumping in to fix it, dismiss their concerns, or give advice, giving them choices when possible (ex. Do you want to wear the purple or green shirt today?) and providing a variety of ways for them to express their grief (art, physical activity, music & dancing, sharing memories of the person, looking at photos, and other forms of play).

What are some other ways you'd encourage adults to support their children when someone dies?

KairosPDX: One thing we always think about is how important it is to connect before we correct. As adults, we don't want to punish children for their emotional expression. If you see the child expressing an emotion through their behavior, you can start with asking, "Hey, how are you feeling? Is there something you want talk about?" before you try to redirect the behavior. We believe that all emotions are necessary and a part of grief. As a family, it's helpful to name and know those

emotions and to remember that those Zones of Regulations we talked about earlier aren't linear. Children can move from green (happy) to red (angry) in a moment. We can help children with any emotion by having tools and strategies they can use to process them in a healthy way. For example, if a child is really sad (blue zone), you could invite them to take a walk outside, dance to a favorite song, or cook something together. It could even be a favorite food of the person who died. Adults can also help children stay connected to the person who died by gathering with others who loved and knew the person to share stories and memories of them. Storytelling is very powerful and helps children stay connected to their ancestry, community, and the person who passed.

Dougy Center: While racism and police brutality against the Black community and those with other marginalized identities are not new, with the recent protests and support for the Black Lives Matter movement, we see it on the news and other forms of media a lot more.

How can adults talk with their children when another Black person is killed or harmed by the police? How can they support them?

KairosPDX: You really want to start this conversation with confidence — helping



children know and understand what is beautiful about being Black. Starting here helps them learn they are valued, loved, and beautiful. The conversation about racism and police brutality is not optional for Black families — it's one they have in an effort to ensure their child's safety and well-being. For White families, this conversation is optional because racism doesn't have the same effect on them or their child's well-being. But, if White families do have this conversation, it's a way to create more collective understanding and build better connections in our communities and our world. So, starting with what's beautiful about Black culture and history is important, even if what brought you to this conversation was someone being killed or harmed by race-based violence.

When someone is killed due to the color of their skin, it's important to still put value to them and their lives. Invite children to think of ways they might want to honor the person who was killed or harmed — on their own and with their community. Some ideas include: making and wearing t-shirts, attending a community gathering or vigil, drawing pictures, writing a letter, or anything else that your child believes will support them and the community.

Dougy Center: Grief, racism, and race-based trauma take a toll on adults too. Sometimes we talk about the idea of cumulative grief as a way to acknowledge how multiple losses affect people.

With the historical trauma of slavery, racism, and oppression, plus the role of epigenetics, what can adults do to care for themselves?

KairosPDX: Just as it's important for children to know and learn about what is beautiful about being Black it's vital for adults to also know that for themselves. Children can pick



up on a disconnect between what you say and what you do or show them. Feeling connected to Black resilience and creativity is a protective factor that reminds us of our stamina. Getting grounded in that for yourself is one of the best ways to then support your children in knowing and feeling it too. You can do this by seeking positive expressions of Black culture, community support, and collective power. Seeking help is an expression of self-love, not weakness or victimhood.

The more you know about yourself, the more intentional your healing process can be. Consider learning more about how multi-generational trauma and epigenetics play a role in how we respond to life events, like grief, in the current day. Naming racism and the stress involved in fighting against it, allows racism to be an external source of harm that can be worked through rather than becoming internalized which can be detrimental to our health and well-being.

Other strategies to care for yourself in this process include expressing joy, calling out courage, reflecting on your experiences, practicing mindfulness around your emotions and physical reactions, and speaking compassionately to yourself. When you own



your own story, you have the power to define yourself and your story's ending.

Dougy Center: While grief is natural and normal — and there is a lot that families can do to support their children in grief — ***what are some signs that children might need some additional support and how can adults access that support?***

KairosPDX: Everyone needs support after a death and what type of support is needed is really individual. Some children will get what they need from friends and family and some might need the help of a peer support group and/or individual counseling. 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 about their experience and training in grief and in working with racism and race-based trauma. It's okay to ask for that support and to be specific in the type of support you're asking for.

If you need immediate assistance, consider contacting your local crisis hotline, Call Blackline 1 (800) 604-5841, or the Crisis Text Line (Text Hello to 741741).

Thank you again for taking time to read this Tip Sheet on supporting children in grief. We send it to you with KairosPDX love. If you learned something you can use, kiss your brain! (Great job, you're working on it!) Grief is different for everyone and every family, so please adapt these suggestions to work for you. If you need additional support or resources, feel free to contact us.

Bordere, T.C., (2019): Suffocated Grief, Resilience and Survival Among African-American Families. In M.H. Jacobsen & A. Petersen (Eds.). *Exploring Grief: Towards a Sociology of Sorrow*. New York, New York: Routledge.



KairosPDX

KairosPDX is an education nonprofit focused on transforming education through a model built on love and inclusion that elevates the voices of historically underserved children, their families, and their communities. 'Kairos' is an ancient Greek word meaning the right or opportune moment (the supreme moment), or a moment of indeterminate time in which something special happens.

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The mission of Dougy Center is to provide 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.

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