



SUPPORTING GRIEVING CHILDREN AND TEENS

Brought to you by Good Grief of NW Ohio



WHAT'S INSIDE

<i>Introduction</i>	05
<i>What is Good Grief</i>	05
<i>What is Childhood Grief</i>	06
<i>How to Help a Grieving Child</i>	08
<i>Developmental Stages of Grief</i>	14
<i>Talking to Children about Funerals</i>	16
<i>10 Things Grieving Children Want You to Know</i>	18
<i>Resources</i>	22



Grief is like the ocean;
it comes on waves ebbing and
flowing. Sometimes the water is calm,
and sometimes it is overwhelming.
All we can do is learn to swim."

Vicki Harrison

Introduction

This handbook is meant to be a resource for anyone who is looking for ways to help children who are grieving the death of someone important to them.

Thank you for taking a few moments to learn more.

Good Grief was founded on these four principles:

Grief is a natural reaction to loss of a loved one for children as well as adults.

Within each individual is the natural capacity to heal oneself.

The duration and intensity of grief are unique for each individual.

Caring and acceptance assist in the healing process.

Incorporated in 2012, Good Grief of Northwest Ohio was established to build awareness of and support for grieving children and their families in Northwest Ohio and provide a safe atmosphere where healing can take place.

Following guidelines and best practices established by other leading children's bereavement centers, Good Grief's program is directly modeled after organizations such as The Dougy Center and Ele's Place. Our Managing Director and Program Director have attended the Summer Institute training at The Dougy Center in Portland, OR.

Good Grief provides free, open-ended by-weekly peer support groups for young people ages 4 to 24 in our program space in Toledo, Ohio. Our staff oversees peer support programming that begins with a family dinner at 6 p.m. followed by age divided peer support sessions from 6:30 pm to 7:45 pm.

Children's peer groups are led by trained volunteer facilitators. Adult caregivers are encouraged, but not required, to attend their own peer support groups offered at the same time the children's groups meet. Led by licensed counselors, these groups give adults a place to share and learn ways to help their children and themselves. (Adults must remain onsite during children's sessions.)

Volunteers complete 18 hours of intensive training and undergo background and reference checks. About 16 volunteers participate in each night of programming by greeting, helping with the family meal and serving as group facilitators.

Contact Info:

We invite you to visit our website www.goodgriefnwo.org to learn more about current program offerings, or call us at (419)360-4939.

All services are offered at no cost.

Childhood Grief

What is Childhood Grief

Studies show that nationally, 1 in 5 children under the age of 18 experience the death of someone close to them. In Lucas County alone, that's over 35 thousand children who are grieving, or will grieve the death of a significant person in their lives.

While grief is a commonly shared experience, many adults do not understand how children process death or grieve. It is a commonly held belief that "kids are resilient; they'll get over it." Caretakers and others often assume that unless a child is acting out or exhibiting decidedly unhealthy behavior, the child is "over it" or not really affected by grief. However because childhood grief is often misunderstood, grief can remain an unresolved conflict well into adulthood.

Children outgrow many difficult things about childhood, fear of the dark, aversion to new situations, or anxiety about school. But a child never outgrows the death of someone they love.

According to research conducted by the New York Life Foundation, a parent's death usually makes a severe impact on a child. 85% of children experience difficulty sleeping, angry outbursts, worry, depression, bed-wetting, and thumb-sucking. Some of these behaviors may fade, but in time other problems, such as lack of confidence and preoccupation with illness, are likely to continue. Research also shows that unresolved childhood grief can lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, behavioral issues, recurring illness, decreased productivity, substance abuse, and suicide.

Good Grief of Northwest Ohio provides children, teens and their families a safe place to grieve and heal following a death by expressing feelings and sharing their experiences. Helping children and teens process grief is vitally important, not only for the individual child's future, but in some measure, the future of society as well.

Good Grief of Northwest Ohio is the only non-profit organization in this area that focuses on children's peer based grief support. This type of support has been proven to reduce the negative effects of ignored or unresolved grief in children and teens by giving them a safe place to share their experiences with others. By intentionally creating a space where kids and teens can come to work through their grief in a nonjudgmental and completely supportive environment, Good Grief of Northwest Ohio provides a safe and caring place for children to grapple with and come to an understanding of thoughts, fears, questions, and emotions associated with grief and loss. It is our goal to help them find their way to a new reality of life - a livable life - after the death of someone they love.

We can't take away the pain of losing a parent or sibling, but through fostering understanding and expression of their feelings of grief, we can help grieving kids develop awareness and specific coping skills that will serve them into adulthood.

A few words from our participants:



"On May 8th, 2014, our world was turned upside down in the most inconceivable way. My 16-year-old daughter took her own life. The first few months following her death were a blur. While my husband and I struggled with our own grief, we still had four younger children at home. We heard about Good Grief of NW Ohio and started attending meetings. The shared meal at the beginning of each program evening allows my children a chance to relax, interact, and feel comfortable with their peers. There they can talk to their friends about death, a subject that is taboo at school and many other places. They can express their thoughts without anyone passing judgement about their emotions. If they don't feel like they want to talk, they can play, color, paint, mold play dough, sing and just be among friends who understand that it is O.K. to be sad."

Madison's baby brother died before he was a year old. The entire family grieves his death and supports one another, but children and teens spend a majority of their time at school and their grief goes with them. Many of Madison's school mates treated her differently and she felt like "the kid whose little brother died." Madison, a vibrant and intelligent middle school student, felt bullied by her classmates. Through her time at Good Grief, she is encouraged to express her feelings about her brother's death and being in Good Grief's safe environment - where she isn't odd or excluded because of it - is helping her adjust to life after his death.

"Good Grief is the best thing I have ever gone to." This quote was taken from the evaluation of a 13-year-old male who lost his sister to suicide. After three months in our program he was able to tell the entire "story" of his experience.

How to Help a Grieving Child

Answer the questions they ask, even the hard ones.

When kids ask questions about a death, it's usually a sign that they're curious about something they don't understand. As an adult, a couple of the most important things you can do for children is to let them know that all questions are okay to ask, and to answer questions truthfully. Be sensitive to their age and the language they use. Answer questions as honestly and directly as possible, being careful not to give more information than they can understand or handle at this point. Often the hardest time to be direct is right after a death. When a child asks what happened, use concrete words such as "died" or "killed" instead of vague terms like "passed away." A young child who hears his mother say, "Dad passed away" or, "I lost my husband," may be expecting that his father will return or simply needs to be found. Being direct and honest minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation and keeps children and teens from having to use their limited energy and inner resources trying to figure out what happened.

Give the child choices whenever possible.

Children appreciate having choices as much as adults do. They have opinions, and feel valued when allowed to choose. And they don't like to be left out. Having choices is empowering. When a loved one dies, the child feels powerless and out of control. Making choices helps children regain a sense of control and trust. Having choices also allows children to grieve a death in the way that is right for them.

Sometimes children in the same family will choose differently. For example, one child may want pictures and memorabilia of the person who died, while another may feel uncomfortable with too many reminders around. If you are a parent, ask your child what feels right to them. Don't assume that what holds true for one child will be the same for another.

Talk about and remember the person who died.

Remembering the person who died is part of the healing process. One way to remember is simply to talk about the person who died. It's okay to use his/her name and to share what you remember. You might say, "Your dad really liked this song," or "Your mom was the best pie maker I know."

Bringing up the name of the person who died is one way to give the child permission to share his or her feelings about the deceased. It reminds the child that it is not "taboo" to talk about the deceased. Sharing a memory has a similar effect. It also reminds the child that the person who died will continue to "live on" and impact the lives of those left behind.

Children may also want keepsakes of the person who died, such as objects their person once owned and carry memories with them, or the pursuit of an interest or activity they shared when the person was alive.

Respect differences in grieving style.

Children often grieve differently from their parents and siblings. Some children want to talk about the death, while others want to be left alone. Some like to stay busy and others withdraw from all activities and stay home. Younger children may be clingy, whereas teens may prefer to spend time on their own or with peers.

Recognizing and respecting that each child grieves in his or her own way is essential to the healing process for a family. Listen to children talk about their feelings and watch their behavior, and you will help clarify and affirm these natural differences.



HOW TO HELP A GRIEVING CHILD

Take a break.

Children grieve in cycles. For example, they may be more inclined to play and divert their focus from the death when the death is recent and parents are grieving intensely. More than adults, children need time to take a break from grief. It is important to know that it's okay to take a break. Having fun or laughing is not disrespectful to the person who died; this is a vital part of grieving, too.

Adapted from The Dougy Center's website www.dougy.org.

Other things that can help.

Children process feelings and emotions like grief through play and self-expression. Give kids the time and materials for free drawing, journaling or other creative art activities. Physical outlets are also helpful. Encourage kids to spend time expending energy. This can be as simple as going for walks, or a bike ride, shooting some hoops, or playing catch. Help kids identify and use a support system. Who are the people they trust and can feel comfortable talking to about their feelings? It can be family, extended family, friends, other trusted adults.

Routines and consistency are especially comforting when life is in upheaval after a death. Create flexible routines around breakfast, school and bedtime. Having a routine allows children to know what to expect on a day-to-day basis and being flexible helps create a trust that their world will be responsive if they need something else. For example, bedtime is at 7:30 p.m. but tonight we can read an extra story.

Help your kids decide what their responses will be when others ask them about the death. Help them choose the words to explain what happened, or what to say if they don't want to talk about it right then. Read books with younger children or have age-appropriate books available for older kids about death and grief. You'll find a list of suggested books on page 22.

When it may be time for additional help...

Most kids don't like being different from others so they may isolate themselves from their peers. Some kids may regress to more child-like behaviors in a need to be comforted. Some kids will start or increase problem behaviors because they do not have the words to appropriately express their feelings of anger, frustration, fear, guilt, and helplessness. Good Grief's age appropriate peer support groups are helping children ages 4 to young adult find a way to express their grief and find their way to a new understanding of life after the death of someone they love.

“

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.

Henri Nouwen

Developmental Stages of Grief

There is no right or wrong way to react to a loss. No two individuals will react in exactly the same way. Grief reactions among children and adolescents are influenced by their developmental level, personal characteristics, mental health, family and cultural influences, and previous experiences with death and loss. These descriptions are meant as a guideline to help understand what is normal for each age range.

Newborn to Three Years

Very young children don't understand that death is final, and may ask questions like "can't we help Daddy up from his grave?" or "when will my sister be back?" Children at this age think in very concrete terms. Phrases like "he went to sleep" or "she's in heaven" are received as heard. So a two year old will want to "wake him up" or "go to heaven too". This is why honest, simple answers to their questions are best. Even though very young children don't have a full understanding of what death is, they definitely react emotionally to loss. Even children as young as two will understand that someone is not present any more.

Four to Six Years

Children in this age range are beginning to understand what "life" is and that the human body sustains life. This can help children understand that if a person gets sick or is in an accident, the body may not recover and that person dies. Young children process new things through repetition. A child at this age may repeat the same question or state the same thought many times. By the age of six, many children are developing an understanding that death is irreversible and the person who died is not coming back.

Six to Nine Years

Kids at this stage can understand that death is universal and unavoidable. They may have seen animals, plants or insects that have died, or experienced the death of a pet. Continuing with concrete thinking, the 6 to 9 year-old may want or need concrete ways to express their grief – seeing the headstone or keeping a photograph of the person who died. This age group may begin to understand the finality of death, be interested in what happens to the body, and want to know more about autopsies, cremation, or burials.

Nine to Thirteen Years

Young people 9 to 13 typically understand death much like an adult does – that it is final and will impact their lives. Children in the pre-teen years may feel anxious that someone else will die, or about dying themselves. You may find kids in this age range are reluctant to share their thoughts and feelings and may prefer to talk with their friends, rather than their family. Many young people at this age are more aware of their own spiritual side, and are better able to identify what emotions they are feeling and how they wish to express them

Thirteen to Eighteen Years

A teenager understands some of the complexities and questions of death as an adult would. A person this age likely has a clearer understanding of "future." Teenagers often develop a "world view" and begin thinking independently about their own spirituality. Because the teen years can be a time of physical, mental, and emotional upheaval, the addition of grief often makes a teen feel even more vulnerable



Talking to Children about Funerals

Whether your child should attend or be involved in funeral or burial rituals depends on a few important factors such as age and developmental level. Children understand death differently at different ages. The younger the child, the less they understand about the permanency of death. Including them in the funeral rites may help them understand the reality of the death and may assist them in beginning the process of letting go. Keep in mind not just the chronological age of your child but their development age. They may be nine years old chronologically, but developmentally they are closer to that of a six-year-old. This only means that your explanations and preparation should be geared to a six-year-old.

An even more important factor than age and emotional development is whether the child wants to attend the funeral or burial. A child's guardian can help him or her understand the whole situation so they may make an informed choice about attending or not attending the funeral or burial. Children can only retain so much information at one time. You may have to repeat the information several times. Be honest and direct but don't give more information than is necessary. Children will most likely ask questions to fill their own need. Find out what your child understands about funerals. Ask them questions such as: What do you think funerals are for? Who will attend the funeral? What happens at the funeral? These questions may lead to additional discussions around your beliefs about where people go when they die. The point of this discussion is to model openness so your child knows they can ask you questions. It is also a time when you can dispel any myths/fears your child might have about funerals/burials. Explain the purpose of a funeral. Say things like: "It's a time to comfort and support each other, it's a time to remember, it's a time to say 'good-bye', it's a time to honor their life."

Describe what the surroundings will look like. Say things like: "People will send flowers to say they feel sad too, there will be a lot of people there and some may be crying and some may be laughing. Some people may say to you that they are sorry for your loss and it's okay to say "thank you". Talk about how people attending a funeral will often share stories about the person who died, and that they may hear people laughing. Kids might find this confusing during such a sad time. You may want to explain that as people share stories, they are remembering happier times and laughter is a part of that. It doesn't mean that person isn't sad about the death too. Describe how the service will go (readings, songs, stories of remembrance). Talk about how the person's body will look. Tell the child that bodies are placed in a special box called a casket and that they may only see the top part of the body in the casket. Tell them that they may have some makeup on and that they do that to make them look nice. Explain that the body will be still and that they are no longer breathing - because that's what happens when someone dies.

If your child wants to touch the body let them know that it will be colder and harder than they are used to (some children just have to touch). DO NOT force touching or kissing on a child, however if they want to, prepare them first. If the child is attending the burial, prepare them for what will happen. Describe the cemetery, its purpose, and any rituals that are performed there. If the body was cremated, talk about the choices people have about what happens to their body when they die (burial, cremation). Sometimes it's helpful for children to know it was the choice of the person who died. Always refer to "Daddy's body" instead

of "Daddy." Remind the child that the body is not breathing anymore and that it cannot feel pain. Tell them that the body is placed in a special room (that are only in funeral homes) and that the room's heat turns the body into ashes. It may help a child to understand that this heat is dry, like the sun, and it's a little like the sun drying up a puddle after the rain. If possible, if the body can be viewed by the child prior to the cremation (and the child wants that) see if it can be arranged.

If your child decides not to attend the funeral/burial they can still be involved by choosing something to be added to the casket or to the service. It can be a picture, a letter, a drawing, or a poem. Sometimes children will give some special item that reminds them of the person. If it is possible during the funeral, ask a trusted adult or older child to be a younger child's buddy. Remember children grieve in bursts. They have a shorter tolerance to stay focused and get fatigued and bored easily. This is not a sign of disrespect, it's just how kids are. Be aware of what others might be saying to your children about death, loss, and funerals. People mean well but can often say things that have a lasting, unintended, negative effect. No need to tell the person unless you're comfortable, but talking with your child about it will clear up any misconceptions. After the funeral, ask your child if he/she would like to visit the gravesite.

Compiled by Good Grief of Northwest Ohio.



"Grief doesn't have a plot. It isn't smooth.
There is no beginning and middle and end."

Ann Hood

A young boy with short hair, wearing a striped shirt, is seen from behind, looking into a large aquarium tank. Inside the tank, several jellyfish are visible, floating in the water. The scene is dimly lit, with the light from the tank illuminating the boy and the jellyfish.

10 THINGS GRIEVING CHILDREN WANT YOU TO KNOW

#1

Grieving children want to be told the truth. Tell grieving children the truth with these considerations in mind:

The age of the child,
The maturity level of the child,
The circumstances surrounding the death, and
Answer questions as honestly as you can.

#2

Grieving children want to be reassured that there will always be someone to take care of them.

Grieving children spend a lot of time worrying about another person in their life who might die.
To help alleviate this fear, it's important to reassure them that there will always be someone in their life who will take care of them.
Enlist the aid of their parent or caregiver to determine a plan for the children. Let the children know what the plan is.

#3

Grieving children want you to know that their grief is long lasting.

A child will grieve the person who died for the rest of their life.
Grieving kids don't "just get over it".
They will often be bewildered when other people in their life seem to have moved on.
Their grief changes over time as they mature.

#4

Children often cope with grief and loss through play.

Typically, they cannot sustain prolonged grief.
Children use play as a way to cope with their grief and to take a break from the grief.

#5

Grieving children want you to know that they will always miss the person who died.

People die, but love doesn't die.
Grieving children will miss the person who died for as long as they live.

#6

Often, grieving children want to share their story and talk about the person who died.

Having an opportunity to tell his or her story is often beneficial to a child's healing process.

Sharing memories about the person who died is also very important.

Grieving children don't want to forget the person who died – they are also worried that others will forget their person

#7

Every child grieves differently. Every child has his or her own grief journey and own way of grieving.

Some children might be more expressive with their grief.

Some children might keep it all in.

Just because children come from the same family doesn't mean that their grief will be the same.

It is important to honor each child's story, even if it is different than his or her sibling's story.

#8

Grieving children often feel guilty.

Grieving children will often feel pangs of guilt.

Even if the guilt is not justified and has no basis in reality.

#9

Even though the child might be acting out, what they are really feeling is intense emotions of grief.

Grieving children frequently feel sad, angry, confused, or scared.

Since they might not know how to express all of these emotions, they may end up acting out instead.

#10

If you're not sure what a grieving child wants, just ask them!

When in doubt, ask a grieving child how you can help.

Check in with the child – do they want to talk about the person who died? Maybe not.

Expect myriad answers.

Do they want to write about their grief or do some other activity to express their grief?



What do they need? You can help grieving children by listening, following their lead, validating their feelings, answering their questions, seeking out additional resources, as needed

Written by: Pamela Gabbay, M.A., FT Program Director,
The Mourning Star Center for Grieving Children and Teens

Resources

Good Grief staff is available to talk with you about your child and family's situation and needs. Our program/office space is open Monday through Friday, 8 am to 5 pm. Our phone number is (419)360-4939 and we welcome your call.

There are very good resources materials available for professionals and non-professionals alike. Here is a list of websites and some of the books we like and find useful. We've also included a list of local mental health providers and organizations.

Websites

Good Grief of NW Ohio – www.goodgriefnwo.org

The Dougy Center – www.dougy.org

National Alliance for Grieving Children – www.childrengrieve.org

Eluna – www.elunanetwork.org

Books for Professionals:

Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy – J. William Worden

Dealing with Dying, Death and Grief During Adolescence – David E. Bulk

There Is No Good Card for This – Kelsey Crowe

It's Okay That You're Not Okay – Megan Devine

Modern Loss: Candid Conversations About Grief (Beginners Welcome) – Rebecca Soffer

On Grief and Grieving – Elizabeth Kubler Ross & David Kessler

Books for Parents

A Parent's Guide to Raising Grieving Children – Phyllis R. Silverman & Madelyn Kelly

Bereaved Children and Teens – Earl A. Grollman

When Your Family's Lost a Loved One: Finding Hope Together – David & Nancy Guthrie

Guiding Your Child Through Grief – Mary Ann Emswiler & James Emswiler

Parenting While Grieving: A Survival Guide – Whatsyourgrief.com

Teen Grief: Caring for the Grieving Teenage Heart – Gary Roe

Books for Children:

The Memory Box: A Book About Grief – Joanna Rowland

My Father's Arms Are a Boat – Stein Erik Lunde

The Invisible String – Patrice Karst & Geoff Stevenson

I Miss You: A First Look at Death – Pat Thomas

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages – Leo Buscaglia

A Terrible Thing Happened – Margaret M. Holmes

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss – Pat Schwiebert

When Dinosaurs Die – Laurie Brown & Marc Brown

Books for Teens and Young Adults

Modern Loss: Candid Conversations About Grief – Rebecca Soffer & Gabrielle Birkner

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers – Earl R. Grollman

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teens and Their Friends – Helen Fitzgerald

Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve – Jenny Lee Wheeler

The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens – Alan Wolfelt & Megan Wolfelt

GRIEF SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Good Grief of Northwest Ohio

440 S. Reynolds Road, Suite D

Toledo, OH 43615

419-360-4939

www.goodgriefnwo.org

The Cullen Center

2150 West Central Avenue

Level 2

Toledo, OH 43606

419-291-7919

*Support for Children Who
have Experienced Trauma*

C.A.R.E.

(Caring and Restoring Each other)

Ronald McDonald House

3883 Monroe St

Toledo, OH 43606

419-291-9475 or email

kim.folk-axe@promedica.org

Pregnancy & Infant Loss Support Group

Hospice of Northwest Ohio -

Perrysburg Center

30000 East River Road

Perrysburg, OH 43551

www.hospicenwo.org

Michigan

Gabby's Grief Center

431 E Elm Ave #3

Monroe, MI 48162

(734) 242-8773

www.gabbysgriefcenter.org

(Peer Grief Support Program for
Adults, children and families)

Elle's Place

5665 Hines Drive

Ann Arbor, MI 48108

(734) 929-6640

www.elesplace.org

(Peer Grief Support Program for
children and families)

"The interesting thing about grief, I think, is that it is its own size. It is not the size of you. It is its own size. And grief comes to you."

Stephen Colbert

