A WITH LOVE, ALWAYS RESOURCE

Helping Children Grieve

Honest words for the smallest grieving hearts

For the adult who has to say the hardest words a child will ever hear, and then stay close for everything that follows: how children understand loss at each age, answers you can borrow for their questions, and small, steady ways to help them carry someone they love.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A Letter From With Love, Always

Dear friend,

My son was nine when my mom died, and sixteen when my dad died. I have helped my own child grieve twice, at two very different ages, and the child who needed a lap and a stuffed animal the first time was not the same person as the teenager who went quiet and wanted his door closed the second time. Both of them were grieving. Both of them needed me. They just needed me in completely different ways, and I had to learn that while I was grieving too.

I did not do it perfectly. I cried at moments I wished I had held together, and I held together at moments when crying together might have helped more. I found some of the right words and missed others. I am telling you that at the start because this guide is not a standard to measure yourself against. It is company. If you are reading it, you already care enough to want to do this well, and that caring matters more to a child than any single perfect sentence.

Inside you will find why honest words help, how grief can look at different ages, sample answers for the questions children actually ask, what to expect in the weeks that follow, and ideas for services, rituals, and school. Take what fits your child, and leave the rest.

With Love, Always offers peer support shaped by lived experience. This is companionship, not clinical counseling, and nothing here is a rule. You know your child. Trust that knowledge, use this as a steady hand beside you, and know that someone who has sat where you are sitting is rooting for both of you.

PART ONE

Honest Words Come First

Why Children Need the Word Died

It can feel kinder to soften the news, but children think in concrete, literal ways, especially when they are young. When an adult says died, a child hears a clear fact: this person's body stopped working, and they will not be back. That clarity is not cruelty. It is the ground everything else stands on. A child who understands what happened, in simple and true terms, can ask real questions and feel real feelings about a real event. A child given a foggy version is left to fill the gaps alone, and what children imagine in the gaps is often more frightening than the truth spoken gently by someone they trust.

How Softened Language Can Confuse or Frighten

The phrases adults reach for most are the ones that cause the most confusion. If a child hears that someone has gone to sleep, bedtime can become scary, because sleep might mean not waking up. If they hear that the family lost someone, a young child may wonder why nobody is looking for them, or worry about getting lost too. Passed on can sound like a journey to somewhere nearby. Went away can sound like a choice, and a child may wait by the window or wonder what they did to make the person leave. None of this means you have failed if these words have already been said in your family. It simply means that, going forward, plain words will help your child more.

Short, Clear, and Said More Than Once

A first conversation can be brief. Name what happened, in one or two plain sentences, and then let the child lead. Young children may absorb a few words and then ask to go and play, and that is not denial. Expect to repeat the same facts many times in the days that follow, sometimes word for word, because repetition is how children make a new reality feel real. Keep your wording steady, and the same across the adults in the child's life when you can, so the story does not shift shape depending on who is telling it.

If you are not sure how to begin, borrow this:

> *"I have something very sad to tell you. Grandma died. That means her body stopped working, and she cannot come back. We will not see her again, and we are going to miss her very much. I am right here, and you can ask me anything, now or later."*

Telling the Truth About How It Happened

Children usually need a simple, honest reason, scaled to their age: an illness that could not be fixed, an accident, a body that grew very old and tired. Leave out frightening detail, but do not invent a gentler cause, because children overhear things and notice contradictions, and a discovered invention can shake their trust when they need it most. If you do not know an answer, saying so is an answer too. "I do not know, and if I learn more, I will tell you" teaches a child that your words can be relied on.

Your Feelings Are Allowed in the Room

Many caregivers worry that crying in front of a child will scare them. In most cases, the opposite is true. A child who sees you cry, hears you name it simply ("I am crying because I miss them, and crying is one way love comes out"), and watches you keep going learns that grief is survivable and feelings can be spoken out loud. What unsettles children is usually not tears. It is unexplained silence, or a household where everyone pretends nothing happened while the air feels heavy. You do not have to perform calm. You only have to keep narrating, in small honest pieces, what is happening inside you.

PART TWO

How Grief Looks at Different Ages

Toddlers and Preschoolers: Love Without Permanence

Very young children do not yet understand that death is permanent. To a three year old, gone can feel like a long trip, and they may ask, days later, when the person is coming back, not because they were not listening, but because their mind cannot yet hold forever. They grieve mostly through behavior and the body: clinginess, disrupted sleep, thumb sucking or baby talk returning, tears that arrive fast and pass fast. What they need most is not explanation. It is sameness. Keep routines steady, goodbyes short and predictable, the same cup, the same song, the same chair. Your calm presence, repeated a hundred ordinary times, is the whole message: the world changed, and you are still here.

Early Elementary: Concrete Questions and Magical Thinking

Children around five to eight are beginning to grasp that death is final, but the understanding comes and goes, and their thinking can still be magical. They may believe a thought, a wish, or a moment of anger caused the death, and may carry that guilt silently unless an adult names it and lifts it off them. They ask wonderfully direct questions about the body and what happens after, sometimes at startling moments, and often process through play and drawing more than talk. What they need most is clear, repeated reassurance on three points: it was not their fault, they are loved and will be cared for, and it is safe to ask you anything, including the same question again tomorrow.

Older Children: Understanding More, Showing Less

By nine, ten, or eleven, most children understand that death is permanent and happens to every living thing, and that bigger understanding can bring bigger worries: about you, about themselves, about who would care for them. They are also becoming keenly aware of fitting in, and many will hide grief at school and release it only at home, or release it as irritability, headaches, or trouble concentrating. They may want facts and details that surprise you. What they need most is honesty without adult burdens, privacy without being left alone with it, and regular low pressure chances to talk: in the car, on a walk, side by side rather than face to face.

Teenagers: Grieving and Growing at the Same Time

Teenagers understand death the way adults do, but they are grieving inside a life already full of change, identity, and the pull toward friends. Their grief may look like withdrawal, dark humor, anger at the unfairness of it, or a fierce wish to seem unaffected. They often turn first to friends or to no one, and a closed door does not always mean you are not needed. It often means they need you on a longer leash. What they need most is respect for their privacy paired with unmistakable availability: food left without a lecture, rides given without an interrogation, and the message, repeated calmly over months, that whenever they want to talk, you can handle hearing it.

Every Child Moves at Their Own Pace

These age bands are a map, not a timetable. Children revisit their grief as they grow, because each new stage of understanding lets them grasp the loss in a new way. A child who lost someone at six may grieve again, freshly, at ten or fifteen, when milestones arrive and the absence has new meaning. Siblings will also grieve differently from one another, and none of them is doing it wrong. Your job is not to synchronize them. It is to keep a door open for each of them.

PART THREE

The Questions Children Actually Ask

Before the Answers: How to Listen

Children's questions often arrive sideways: in the car, at bedtime, in the middle of a game, weeks after you thought the subject was settled. Underneath many questions sits a smaller, more personal one, usually some version of, am I safe, am I to blame, and am I still loved. When a question startles you, it is fine to buy a breath: "That is an important question. Let me think for a second so I answer it well." Answer the question asked, in plain words, and then stop. Children will ask for the next piece when they are ready. The sample answers below are yours to borrow exactly as written, or to adjust into your family's own words and beliefs.

"Did I Make It Happen?"

Many children ask this directly. Far more wonder it silently, remembering a cross word, a broken rule, or a wish made in anger. Do not wait to be asked. Say it plainly, more than once, and be specific if you can.

> *"No. Nothing you said, did, thought, or wished made this happen. Not the time you were mad, and not anything else. This happened because their body stopped working, and nobody in our family caused it, especially not you."*

"Will You Die Too?"

This question is almost always asking something closer: will I be left alone. Answer both layers. Be honest that every living thing dies one day, because a flat promise that you will never die will not hold, and children know it. Then anchor them in the present and in the plan.

> *"Everybody dies someday, and I expect to be here with you for a very long time while you grow up. And even if anything ever happened to me, you would not be alone. There are people who love you who would take care of you, and I can tell you exactly who they are."*

"Where Are They Now?"

Here, families differ, and your own beliefs are the right foundation. Share what your family believes, name it as a belief, and leave room for the child's own wondering. If your family does not hold a shared belief, honesty about that is fine too, and a child can be comforted by the parts everyone can agree on: the person is remembered, talked about, and loved.

> *"That is something people wonder about a lot. In our family, we believe they are at peace and not hurting anymore. What I know for sure is that they are not in pain, and that we get to keep loving them and talking about them for the rest of our lives."*

"Can They Still See Me?"

Children ask this at recitals, on birthdays, and over report cards. Whatever your beliefs, you can answer in a way that comforts without inventing certainty you do not have. Many families find it helps to turn the question gently toward memory and pride: what the person knew about the child, and how that love is carried forward.

> *"I cannot know exactly how that works. What I do know is how proud they were of you, and that has not changed. When something good happens, we can say their name and remember that they loved seeing you shine, and we still get to feel proud together."*

"Who Will Take Care of Me?"

This is the most practical question a child can ask, and it deserves the most concrete answer you can give. Name names. Describe the plan in ordinary detail: who would make dinner, where the child would sleep, who would take them to school. For a child, a plan is not paperwork. A plan is proof that the adults have thought ahead, and that their world has a floor under it.

> *"I will take care of you, and that is my job and my joy. If I ever could not, Aunt Sam would, and you would live at that house with the blue door that you already know. You will always be taken care of by people who love you. That part is settled, even on hard days."*

PART FOUR

What You May See, Day to Day

Children Grieve in Puddles, Not Rivers

Adult grief can feel like a river, constant and carrying everything with it. Children's grief is more like puddles. They step into it fully, cry hard for ten minutes, and then step out and ask for a snack or a game, completely sincere in both moments. This can look, to a worried adult, like they do not understand or do not care. It is neither. Small hearts dose grief in amounts they can handle, then return to the work of childhood, which is play. The puddle pattern is protection, not indifference. Expect to step in and out of puddles alongside them for a long time, sometimes several in one afternoon.

Regression: Going Backwards to Feel Safe

After a loss, children often slide back to an earlier version of themselves. A child who was dry at night may wet the bed. An independent seven year old may want to be carried, fed, or rocked. A teenager may want to sleep in your room. Regression is a child reaching for the last time life felt completely safe, and it usually eases on its own as safety rebuilds. Meet it with patience: provide the comfort asked for without shame or teasing, keep expectations gentle for a while, and quietly welcome each small step forward when it comes.

Reenacting in Play

Young children process experience through play, so do not be surprised to see funerals staged for stuffed animals, ambulances racing across the carpet, or a game in which someone dies and comes back, over and over. This is not morbid, and it does not need correcting. It is a child rehearsing the event at a size they control, where they get to decide the ending. You can join if invited, follow their lead, and let the play say what words cannot yet. If the play turns toward blame, offer one gentle line inside the game: "The bear did not make it happen. Sometimes bodies stop working." Then let the game go on.

Stomachaches, Headaches, and Tired Bodies

Grief lives in the body, and children, who have fewer words for it, often show it there first. Stomachaches before school, headaches at bedtime, lost appetites, restless sleep, and general tiredness are all common companions of grief. Rule out ordinary illness as you normally would, and mention the loss to the child's doctor so you are not carrying the question alone. At home, treat body complaints as real communication rather than excuses: a child whose stomach hurts every Monday may be telling you, accurately, that Mondays feel too big right now. Comfort, routine, rest, and time solve more of this than lectures ever will.

Big Feelings in Small Bursts, and Seeming Fine

Expect feelings to arrive at full size and without scheduling: rage over a broken crayon that is really rage about everything, tears at a song, sudden laughter that startles even the child. Name what you see without insisting on an explanation: "That was a big wave. I am here." Just as important, expect stretches of seeming completely fine, at the park, at a party, weeks in a row, and let that be fine. Children are allowed joy in the middle of loss, and their laughter is not evidence that they have forgotten.

PART FIVE

The Funeral or Service

Should Children Go?

In most cases, children do better when they are offered a real choice rather than being either required to attend or quietly excluded. Being left out can leave a child imagining something far worse than the event itself, and can carry a sting later: everyone else got to say goodbye. Explain what the service is for, in plain words: a time when everyone who loved this person gathers, remembers them, and says goodbye together. Then ask, and honor the answer either way. A child who says no has not failed anyone. Offer an alternative goodbye, like a drawing to be placed with the person or a small ritual at home, so that no never means no way to take part.

Preparing Them for Exactly What They Will See

Surprises are the enemy. Before the day, walk through it step by step: where it will be, how many people, how long it may last, what the room will look like, and what will happen in what order. If there will be an open casket, describe it honestly beforehand, including that the person will look still and different, will feel cool if touched, and cannot see, hear, or feel anything. If there will be cremation, explain in advance what an urn is, so nothing in the room is a mystery. Tell them people may cry, laugh at stories, or both, and that any feeling they have, including boredom or wanting a snack, is allowed.

A Job, and an Exit With a Trusted Adult

Two arrangements make the day far easier. The first is a job. A task gives a child a place inside the event instead of the feeling of being on display: carrying flowers, handing out programs, placing a drawing, choosing a photo, or pressing play on a favorite song. Keep the job small, chosen by the child, and easy to set down. The second is an exit. Assign one trusted adult whose only responsibility is the child, someone free to step out for air, find a quiet room, get water, or leave entirely if the child is done. Agree on the plan before you arrive, and tell the child: "If you need out, you find this person, and out you go. No questions, no trouble."

PART SIX

Rituals Children Can Take Part In

Why Doing Something Helps

Grief can leave a child feeling helpless in a story written entirely by adults. A ritual hands them a piece of the story. It does not need to be large, public, or permanent. It needs to be theirs: something their hands made, their voice chose, or their idea started. The rituals below work at almost any age, in the first week or on an ordinary Tuesday two years from now.

A Drawing or a Letter to Go With Them

Invite the child to draw a picture or write or dictate a letter for the person who died, to be placed with them, kept in a special place, or read aloud at home. Let the content be entirely the child's: a favorite memory, things they will miss, the two of them doing something ordinary and beloved. Resist editing it toward what sounds appropriate. A letter that says "I miss your pancakes and your laugh was too loud" is a perfect letter. If the child does not want to make one, that answer stands too.

Choosing a Song

Music reaches children in places words do not. Let the child help choose a song for the service, for the drive, or for a small playlist that belongs to this person: their favorite, one that reminds the child of them, or one the child finds comforting right now. Hearing it may bring tears sometimes and smiles other times, and both are welcome. In the months ahead, that song will show up uninvited in stores and on the radio, and having chosen it together gives the child a small sense of authorship when it does: "That is our song for them."

A Memory Box

Give the child a box, a bag, or a shelf that is theirs alone, for keeping things that connect them to the person: a photograph, a ticket stub, a recipe card, a small object, drawings, and notes written over time. Children worry, often silently, about forgetting: a voice, a laugh, the exact way a hug felt. A memory box answers that worry with something they can hold and open whenever they choose. Add to it together when something surfaces.

Planting Something

Planting gives grief a living, growing companion. A flower, a herb pot on a windowsill, or a tree where your family has permission to plant one: the size matters far less than the tending. Watering something and watching it change with the seasons gives a child a gentle, visible truth to hold alongside the hard one, that love can keep being cared for even after a person dies. If the plant struggles or dies, meet that moment honestly, without treating it as an omen. Plants are plants. You can plant again, together, and that second planting is its own quiet lesson in going on.

PART SEVEN

School and the Wider World

Telling the Teacher and the Counselor

Before your child goes back, tell the school. A short note or call to the teacher and the school counselor, naming who died, the child's relationship to them, and what your child has been told, means no adult at school has to guess, and your child will not have to break the news in a hallway. Ask the school to tell you if they see changes, and ask what flexibility exists for the first weeks: a quiet place to go, a signal for stepping out, a little grace on homework.

The First Days Back

Keep mornings as ordinary as you can: the same breakfast, the same route, the same goodbye. Tell your child what classmates might say, and practice one simple sentence they can use, such as "My grandpa died, and I do not want to talk about it at school," or the opposite, if talking helps them. Some children want everyone to know so nothing feels secret. Others want school to be the one place where life is normal. Both wishes deserve respect, and a wish can change by Friday. At pickup, leave the door open without pushing through it: "I thought about you today. Anything you want me to know?"

The Hard Moments Months Later

School grief rarely ends in the first month. It waits in assignments and occasions: the family tree project, the card making session before a holiday, the book with a death in chapter three. Stay loosely in touch with the teacher across the year, and give the school a heads up before dates you know will be tender. At home, when a hard moment surfaces long after everyone else has stopped asking, treat it as fresh, not late. A child who breaks down in October over a loss from spring is not behind. They are right on the schedule of a heart that grieves in puddles and revisits as it grows.

Answering Other Adults in Front of Your Child

Well meaning adults will ask about the death in front of your child, in grocery lines and at gatherings, sometimes with details no child needed to hear retold. You are allowed to protect the moment. Step in warmly and early, and redirect: "We are keeping the details just in the family, but we so appreciate your care. How have you been?" Later, in private, let your child know they never have to perform their grief for anyone, and that you will always step in when a conversation is too big for the room it is happening in.

Holidays and Their Person's Birthday

The calendar will keep bringing this person back around: their birthday, the holidays they anchored, the anniversary of the day they died. Mark the dates on your own calendar a little early, so they do not ambush you or your child unprepared. Then ask the child what, if anything, they would like to do: bake the cake anyway, visit a place, look at photos, or let the day pass quietly. Wishes may change from year to year, and a child who wants a full celebration at eight may want near silence at twelve. Either way, naming the day out loud, even briefly, tells the child that remembering is permitted here.

When Your Own Grief and Theirs Collide

There will be days when your child needs comfort at the exact moment you have none left to give, when their puddle and your river rise at the same time. Every honest parent or guardian who has lived it knows the guilt that comes with a short temper or a closed bathroom door. Build a small bench of support before you desperately need it: another trusted adult your child can go to on your hardest days, friends you can text without preamble, and permission, given to yourself in advance, to say, "I love you, I am having a big grief wave of my own, and I need twenty quiet minutes. Then I am yours." A child who hears that learns the deepest lesson in this guide: feelings can be named, needs can be spoken, and love stays.

PART EIGHT

When a Child May Need More Support

Grief Has No Deadline, and Still, Watch the Shape of It

There is no schedule in this guide, on purpose. Grief does not move in set stages or steps, and a child can be doing genuinely well and still have a terrible week a year later. What is worth watching is not whether grief is still present. It is how it is shaped over time. For most children, the sharpest pain slowly becomes easier to carry, even though it never disappears, and good hours gradually outnumber hard ones. If instead things seem to be deepening rather than easing over a long stretch, or the hard parts are growing bigger instead of smaller, that is information worth acting on, not a verdict on you or on your child.

Signs Worth a Conversation With a Professional

Consider reaching out if you see changes that persist and intensify: talk of wanting to join the person who died, or of not wanting to be here; big and lasting changes in sleep, appetite, schoolwork, or friendships; a child who withdraws from nearly everything they used to love; constant fear that something will happen to you; or physical complaints that keep growing instead of settling. One hard day is not on this list. A pattern that worries you, over time, is. Wondering whether to ask for help is reason enough to ask.

One More Kind Adult in Their Corner

Framing matters, for you and for your child. Asking for more support is not an announcement that something is wrong with them. It is adding one more kind adult to their corner: the child's doctor, who knows their history; a school counselor, who sees them in their everyday world; or a counselor outside school, whose whole job is listening to your child. Tell your child exactly that: "This is someone whose job is helping kids with big feelings. You can tell them things you tell me, and things you do not." Trust your instincts. You know your child's ordinary. If something feels off in a way you cannot shake, let that feeling make the phone call.

YOUR TURN

A Page for the Grown Up Doing This

Fill this in on a quiet day, in your own words. There are no right answers here. This page is a place to get ready, so that hard moments find you a little less unprepared.

The words I will use to tell them (plain, honest, and in my own voice)

The questions I am ready for (and the ones I still want to think through)

What my child needs most at their age (routine, facts, privacy, closeness)

The ritual we will do together (a letter, a song, a memory box, something planted)

Who at school knows (teacher, counselor, and when I told them)

The trusted adult for the service, and for my hardest days (one name for each, if they differ)

The dates I want to be ready for (their birthday, holidays, the anniversary)

What I want to remember about how they loved my child (for the days my child asks)

If you are ever in crisis, please reach out right away. You can call or text the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** at **988** anywhere in the United States, or reach the **Crisis Text Line** by texting **HOME** to **741741**. Both are free, confidential, and answered by people who are there to listen, day or night.

You cannot take this loss away from your child, and you were never supposed to. What you can do, and what you are already doing by reading this, is walk beside them through it: honest words, steady love, room for every feeling, and a hand that stays. That companionship is not a small thing. To a grieving child, it is nearly everything. Go gently, with them and with yourself.

With love, always