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# How Children Grieve



A toolkit for **parents + carers**  
created by **Clinical Psychologists**

# Start here: worksheets for every age

Grief looks **different at every age**. Our worksheet bundles give you **simple, guided activities** you can use right now to **build safety, language for feelings, and connection** to the person who died.

[thelossfoundation.org/  
child-grief-worksheets](http://thelossfoundation.org/child-grief-worksheets)



## Early Childhood (Ages 3–6)

*“Concrete Thinkers”*

Helping little ones make sense of what's happened through **play, story, and art**.



## Middle Childhood (Ages 7–10)

*“Curious Realists”*

Building **emotional language** and **coping skills** while exploring **fairness** and **feelings**.



## Preteens + Early Teens (Ages 11–13) –

*“Feeling It Deeply”*

Supporting **reflection, self-expression**, and the search for **meaning**.



## Teens (Ages 14–18)

*“Meaning-Makers”*

Encouraging **independence, identity**, and **connection** through journaling and creativity.

When someone important dies, both children and adults experience grief. It can feel **overwhelming, confusing, and unpredictable**. Sometimes we think of grief as a step-by-step process to complete – but in reality, grief is not a race or a checklist. There is no “end” to grief, and **each child experiences it differently**, returning to it in waves throughout their lives.

Rather than trying to “fix” grief, the goal is to help your child navigate it **safely** and for them to **feel supported**. This means equipping them with:

-  **Emotional literacy** – understanding and naming their feelings without judgement.
-  **Coping strategies** – ways to express sadness, anger, guilt, or confusion safely.
-  **Resilience and security** – knowing that, even though life has changed, they are safe, loved, and supported.
-  **Connection to their loved one** – remembering, honouring, and celebrating the person who has died.

This guide is designed to provide **practical, simple** steps to support your child. You do not need to have all the answers – what matters most is being **present, patient, and compassionate**.

By focusing on these supportive foundations, we hope to help children feel **heard, understood**, and able to **live fully** while carrying the memory of their loved one with them.





# Your Child's Questions + Modeling 'Healthy Grief'

Children notice emotions – seeing parents cry or show sadness can **normalise grief** and help them understand that **it's okay to express difficult feelings.**

Children may also see **anger, guilt, frustration, or relief** – all are valid emotions during this time. Observing these emotions provides children with **a model for processing feelings safely.**

*"Children whose parents **model healthy coping** are twice as likely to **manage their own emotions effectively.**"*

**– Child Bereavement UK**

**"What if my child sees me... angry, frustrated, upset?"**

How you cope with grief and emotions gives children cues for **their own emotional regulation.** Simple strategies like taking a break, talking with someone you trust, or doing a calming activity show children healthy ways to manage strong emotions.

Example: *"I'm feeling really frustrated right now, so I'm going to take a few deep breaths and sit quietly for a moment."*

Child's Question	Suggested Response
<b>"Why did they die?"</b>	<b>Keep it simple and truthful.</b> <i>"They were very ill and their body stopped working."</i>
<b>"Will I die too?"</b>	<b>Reassure gently.</b> <i>"You are safe, and healthy. Most people live a long time."</i>
<b>"Why am I sad/angry?"</b>	<b>Validate their feelings.</b> <i>"Grief can have lots of feelings – sadness, anger, worry. All of these feelings are normal."</i>
<b>"Can I still talk about them?"</b>	<b>Encourage expression.</b> <i>"Yes, you can talk about them anytime. It helps us remember them."</i>
<b>"Why is everyone else acting normal?"</b>	<b>Explain differences in coping.</b> <i>"People grieve differently. Some show it, some keep it inside – both are okay."</i>



# Common Reactions by Age

Every child **grieves differently**, and their reactions can be unpredictable. You might see **laughter** one moment, **tears** the next, or even periods of apparent calm with **no visible reaction at all**. All of these responses are **normal** - grief doesn't follow a set pattern, and children often experience a mix of emotions as they **try to make sense of their loss**.

Age	Common Reactions	Examples / Scenarios
<b>Young children (3-7)</b>	Confusion, regression, clinginess, fear of separation, sleep disturbances.	Bedwetting, tantrums, repeated questions ("Will they come back?"), refusing to sleep alone, nightmares, needing constant reassurance.
<b>Tweens (8-11)</b>	Withdrawal, guilt, anger, anxiety, irritability, preoccupation with fairness, somatic complaints.	Avoiding friends, irritability, blaming self, stomach aches, headaches, obsessive questions about the death, reluctance to participate in activities they once enjoyed.
<b>Teens (12+)</b>	Masked grief, risk-taking, mood swings, isolation, existential questioning, changes in sleep or appetite.	Irritability, isolating in their room, experimenting with risky behaviours, sudden disinterest in hobbies, questioning life/death, fluctuating motivation.
<b>All ages</b>	Physical manifestations, sudden changes in behaviour, regression in social skills.	Clinginess to caregivers, increased tantrums, regression in toileting or speech, frequent crying, loss of interest in friends or play, somatic complaints (stomach, headaches), trouble concentrating in school.



# How Children Grieve: Age-Specific Guidance

*"Over 70% of bereaved children report that talking openly with a parent or carer helped them feel supported and understood."*  
 - Winston's Wish / Child Bereavement UK

	Young children (3–7 years)	Tweens (8–11 years)	Teens (12+ years)
Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May think death is <b>temporary</b> or <b>reversible</b>.</li> <li>Ask <b>repetitive questions</b> as they process the concept.</li> <li>Grief may show as <b>regression</b> (clinginess, toileting accidents, tantrums).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand finality, but may struggle with <b>expressing emotions</b>.</li> <li>May <b>hide feelings</b>, become <b>irritable</b>, or show <b>anxiety</b> about fairness/justice.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can grasp <b>permanence</b> of death and <b>broader existential ideas</b>.</li> <li>May <b>mask feelings</b>, <b>withdraw</b>, or <b>act out</b> in anger or risk-taking.</li> </ul>
Tips for support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use <b>simple, concrete language</b>: <i>"They have died, which means we won't see them in person again."</i></li> <li><b>Repeat</b> info gently and consistently.</li> <li>Use <b>books, drawings</b>, and <b>play</b> to help express feelings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage them to <b>journal/write</b> to the person who has died.</li> <li>Allow <b>privacy</b>, but check in regularly.</li> <li><b>Guide conversations</b> – ask specific questions <i>"What do you miss most about them?" / "What did you love doing together?"</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respect their need for <b>autonomy</b> while keeping communication channels <b>open</b>.</li> <li>Encourage <b>peer or mentor support</b>, online or in-person.</li> <li>Offer <b>creative outlets</b> (music, art, activism, volunteering).</li> </ul>

Key tips for all ages: **Repeat** key points gently. Use **clear, honest** language. **Invite questions**, but don't force. **Validate all feelings**. Check **understanding**.



# Supporting Neurodivergent Children Through Grief

*“Children with ADHD are nearly **three times more likely** to experience **anxiety disorders** compared to their neurotypical peers, **which can intensify** during periods of **grief.**”*  
– Psychology Today

Children with ADHD, autism, or sensory regulation differences may **experience grief differently**:

-  Reactions may be **heightened** or **delayed**; meltdowns or shutdowns are common.
-  May struggle to verbalise feelings, needing **visual** or **concrete cues**.

## Tips for Support:

-  Use **visual reminders**, social **stories**, or **calendars** to mark routines, funerals, and anniversaries.
-  Create **predictable routines** to provide stability.
-  Allow **movement breaks** or **sensory activities** to help regulate emotions.
-  Use **clear, concrete language** and check understanding frequently.

*“Neurodivergent children benefit from **understanding, acceptance, accommodations, and adjustments** that support their unique needs, especially after a **bereavement.**”*  
– Winston’s Wish





# Supporting Wellbeing at Home

Children need both **structure** and **safe ways** to express emotions to **feel secure** during grief. Reactions can change from **day to day**, so staying **flexible** yet **consistent** is key.



**Routines = security** – Keep regular mealtimes, school attendance, and bedtimes where possible. Predictability helps children feel safe.



**Encourage expression** – Use creative outlets – art, journaling, play, storytelling, or music – as safe ways to express emotions.



**Notice cues** – Watch for withdrawal, irritability, physical complaints (stomach aches, headaches), or sudden changes in behaviour.



**Validate fun and joy** – Reassure children that it's okay to laugh, play, and enjoy themselves even while grieving.



**Praise small achievements** – Celebrate everyday moments, from finishing homework to playing with friends.



**Keep communication open** – Invite conversations but don't force them. Sometimes children express themselves in actions more than words.



**Balance honesty with reassurance** – Be truthful about what has happened while reminding them they are loved and cared for.



**Help them name their feelings** – Noticing and labelling emotions helps children make sense of what they're feeling and supports emotional regulation.

*"You seem **angry** – of course you are, that **makes sense**. What **could help** with that anger right now?"*

*"You looked **thoughtful** just now. Do you want to **share** what you were **remembering** or **thinking** about?"*

*"Today sounded like it was **a hard day** for you. Would you like a **hug**, or some **quiet time**?"*

*"I see you've been **keeping to yourself**. That's **okay** – **I'll be here** when you feel ready to talk."*

*"You **drew a picture of them** – that's a lovely way to **keep them in our memories**."*





# Grief worksheets for children + young people



Our grief worksheet packs are designed to help children of all ages **explore feelings, build safety, and express memories** in developmentally appropriate ways. Each pack recognises how children **think, feel, and make sense of loss** at different stages.



## Early Childhood (Ages 3–6) "Concrete Thinkers"

**How they think:** See death as temporary or reversible; use play and imagination to make sense of events.

**What they need:** Simple honesty, routine, reassurance, and creative outlets.

### Example worksheets:



**My Feelings House** – Draw feelings in different "rooms" to understand emotions.



**When I'm Feeling Sad** – Identify comforting people, activities, and safe spaces.



## Middle Childhood (Ages 7–10) "Curious Realists"



**How they think:** Begin to grasp the permanence of death; ask practical and emotional questions.

**What they need:** Clear information, emotional vocabulary, and coping tools.

### Example worksheets:

 **My Grief Jar** – Teaches that grief doesn't shrink, but life grows around it.

 **Helping Myself When I Miss Someone** – Encourages self-soothing and problem-solving.



# Grief worksheets for children + young people



## Preteens + Early Teens (Ages 11–13) "Feeling It Deeply"



**How they think:** Understand finality; seek meaning and connection.

**What they need:** Space to reflect, honest conversation, and permission to feel mixed emotions.

### Example worksheets:



**The Box + the Ball** – Visualises how grief changes impact over time.



**5-Minute Check-In** – Quick emotional reflection and regulation tool.



## Teens (Ages 14–18) "Meaning-Makers"

**How they think:** Explore abstract ideas of identity, justice, and purpose.

**What they need:** Autonomy, creative expression, and opportunities to find meaning.

### Example worksheets:



**A Letter I Need to Write** – Express unspoken thoughts and memories.



**Exploring Who I Am After Loss** – Reflect on identity, change, and growth.



[thelossfoundation.org/  
child-grief-worksheets](http://thelossfoundation.org/child-grief-worksheets)





# More support

## **Child Bereavement UK**

Supports families and educates professionals when a child grieves or when a child dies.

📞 0800 02 888 40

🌐 [childbereavementuk.org](http://childbereavementuk.org)

## **Compassionate Friends**

Provides peer support for bereaved parents and siblings after the death of a child. Offers helpline, local and online groups, and supportive resources for families coping with child or sibling loss.

📞 0345 123 2304

🌐 [tcf.org.uk](http://tcf.org.uk)

## **Grief Encounter**

Specialist support for children and young people who have lost someone close.

📞 0808 802 0111

🌐 [griefencounter.org.uk](http://griefencounter.org.uk)

## **Hope Again (by Cruse)**

Online community offering advice, forums, and resources for young people experiencing grief.

🌐 [hopeagain.org.uk](http://hopeagain.org.uk)

## **Samaritans (24/7)**

A confidential listening service for anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide.

📞 116 123

🌐 [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

## **The Loss Foundation**

A UK charity providing **cancer bereavement support** for **adults** through groups, events, and resources.

🌐 [thelossfoundation.org](http://thelossfoundation.org)

## **Winston's Wish**

Offers support for **children** and **young people up to 25** after the death of someone important.

📞 08088 020 021

🌐 [winstonswish.org](http://winstonswish.org)

