



# Supporting Children After a Loved One Dies

## A Trauma-Informed Healing Resource

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Coalition for Children, Youth & Families

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The reality of loss can arrive without warning. It might come as an unexpected late-night call, a staggering text, or a startling knock on your front door from a relative, social worker, or police officer. You are informed that a significant person in your child's life—a birth parent, a beloved sibling, an extended family member, a teacher, a mentor, or a previous caregiver—has died.

As a parent or caregiver, you suddenly find yourself navigating two powerful emotional grief and loss trauma triggers: your own shock and grief, and the profound, often confusing, complex, and immense sorrow of the child you love.

For a child who has already experienced significant loss and trauma, this new death can shake the foundations of their world, triggering past emotional pains, prior losses, and an unnerving fear and uncertainty of future abandonment.

The key concept you need to be aware of is that the loss of a loved one can reactivate past trauma. This emotional roller coaster leads to complex grief—a complicated, disrupted healing process, where the current sadness immediately links to all their past, unresolved emotional wounds.

This resource is designed to help you support your child through this complex loss by providing practical, trauma-informed healing resources.



## **Understanding How Complex Trauma Intersects with Complex Grief**

The intense reaction your child has to a death is best understood by looking at two connected ideas: complex trauma and complex grief.

**Complex trauma** is the deep foundation, referring to the many past harms your child suffered—such as abuse, neglect, or multiple family separations—that happened over a long time. This trauma taught them that the world isn't safe and that the people they rely on will eventually leave. It created a highly sensitive, volatile internal environment.

When the death of a loved one occurs, it acts as a trigger for **complex grief**. This isn't just typical sadness; it's a complicated, disrupted healing process where the current loss immediately links to all their past, unresolved wounds. This means their grief won't be a straight line, but a journey of intense, unpredictable emotional "waves."

Children with trauma histories may show trauma-driven reactions (like extreme fear or shutting down) instead of just sadness, and they might even feel a conflicting mix of anger, relief, and sorrow if the person who died was also a source of their original trauma. Ultimately, death is the trigger, but the reason their reaction is so disruptive and non-linear is that they are simultaneously reliving and processing the prior wounds caused by complex trauma.

## **Understanding Trauma-Informed Reactions (The "Why")**

When a child with a history of trauma grieves, the reaction often looks like a trauma response (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) rather than an expected grief response. This is because their grief is mixed with fear and a feeling that the world is fundamentally unpredictable and unsafe. Understanding the underlying feeling is the key to offering the right support.

<b>The Visible Behavior</b>	<b>The Underlying Emotional Response</b>	<b>How to Respond</b>
Meltdowns/Lashing Out	Fear/Fight/Flight (Overwhelmed nervous system)	Focus on co-regulation. Speak softly, and breathe with them. Do not try to reason or punish during the crisis. Be fully present and provide unconditional love and support.
Avoidance/Shutting Down	Fear of Abandonment/Freeze (Emotional self-protection)	Gently offer connection without pressure. "I notice you're quiet." "I'm so sorry for your loss. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere." "When you are ready to talk to me, I will be here for you."
Extreme Guilt/Self-Blame	Feelings of personal responsibility. (Trauma reinforces their deep-rooted emotions that they are at fault for everything that goes wrong)	Directly counter the guilt. "Nothing you said, thought, or did caused <u>(their loved one's name)</u> death. You are not to blame."
Regression (Bedwetting, baby talk, clinging)	Need for Safety/Attachment (Seeking the comfort and reassurance from their early childhood)	Accept the regression temporarily while increasing physical closeness and reassurance. Your consistent presence reinforces emotional safety and security.

## Practical Strategies for Compassionate Support

Your most powerful tool is your presence. Provide them with a calm, consistent, unconditional anchor. Focus on creating felt safety, instead of trying to fix their grief.

### **Strategy 1: Regulate Their Body, Not Just Behavior**

Grief resides in the body. Emotional healing cannot begin until the nervous system feels secure.

- Model calm (co-regulation) by showing them your healthy coping skills. Talk out loud: “I feel sad right now, so I'm going to take three deep breaths to help my body calm down.”
- Maintain household routines (mealtimes, bedtimes) as much as possible, as predictability and stability are at opposite ends of the spectrum of trauma. This routine signals that the core structure of their world is intact.
- Keep open lines of communication. You will want to share news honestly, using clear language (“Trevor died,” not “Trevor passed away.”) Another piece of clear communication includes letting the child know they can ask questions whenever they are ready.

### **Strategy 2: Honoring Their Loss**

Acknowledge the significance of the person who died, regardless of the complexity of that relationship.

- Give the child permission to feel everything. Validate complicated feelings. For example: “I know that you enjoyed spending time on visits with your dad, and you're also sad that you weren't able to spend more time together.”
- Empower the child by encouraging them to create a way in which to honor the life of their loved one. Perhaps they could write a song or poem about their loved one, or create a memory box filled with treasured memories they shared. Another potential idea is creating a legacy gift.



### **Strategy 3: Honoring their Legacy**

A legacy gift or memorial project is an intentional and empowering act of service or creation that helps a grieving child honor their loved one by making a positive impact. It helps them transform their feelings of sadness into an opportunity to honor their loved one's life in a meaningful way.

Here are some examples of legacy gifts:

Type of Gift	Examples of the Action	Purpose/Benefit for the Child
Creative & Expressive	Writing a song, poem, or story about their loved one.	Allows emotional externalization and creates a lasting personal tribute.
Service & Donation	Organizing a food collection drive for a local food pantry.	Connects the loved one's values to a tangible act of kindness; empowers the child through action.
Physical Memorial	Planting a tree, shrub, or planting a vegetable or flower garden.	Provides a beautiful, living, and accessible place for reflection and connection.
Personal Connection	Creating a memory box or digital scrapbook filled with photos, small items, and cherished stories.	Preserves tangible memories and serves as a tool for remembrance when grief is not acute.
Commemorative Events	Establishing a small, annual tradition on the loved one's birthday, such as hiking a favorite trail, or visiting a special place that their loved one enjoyed going.	Normalizes remembrance and establishes a predictable, positive way to acknowledge their loved one by celebrating their life and enduring legacy.

#### **Strategy 4: Understand Grief as Waves (An Ocean Metaphor)**

Grief isn't a fixed state; it is fluid, often unpredictable, and constantly changing, like the waves in the ocean. Your response must match the intensity of the grief wave they are experiencing.

For children who have experienced previous traumas and losses, grief rarely occurs in a straight line. It often feels like the ocean—vast, powerful, and utterly unpredictable. As a caregiver, you are the lighthouse, helping your child navigate these sometimes calm, sometimes turbulent waters.

The following are the "waves" of grief you may witness, and how you can respond:

#### **The Gentle Waves**

This is grief that comes out sideways, often appearing as a small change in behavior—a child is suddenly clingier, asks more "what-if" questions about safety, or has trouble focusing on homework.

Caregiver Response: Acknowledge the feeling, not just the behavior. "I see you are having a hard time concentrating today. Is that worry coming back because you're thinking about [Person Who Died]?" Your role is to provide reassurance, build connection, and reinforce trust.

#### **The Rip Current**

This is the sudden, intense moment of grief that pulls the child under unexpectedly. It might happen during a seemingly happy event, like a birthday party, or when triggered by a song, a memory, a smell, or a place. The child may be irritable, angry, withdrawn, or have a sudden meltdown.

Caregiver Response: Prioritize safety and connection over correction. Get down to the child's level.

"I can only imagine how overwhelming this must feel for you right now. I'm here for you. You don't have to talk, but let's take three deep breaths together." Wait for the current to pass, then gently re-engage.

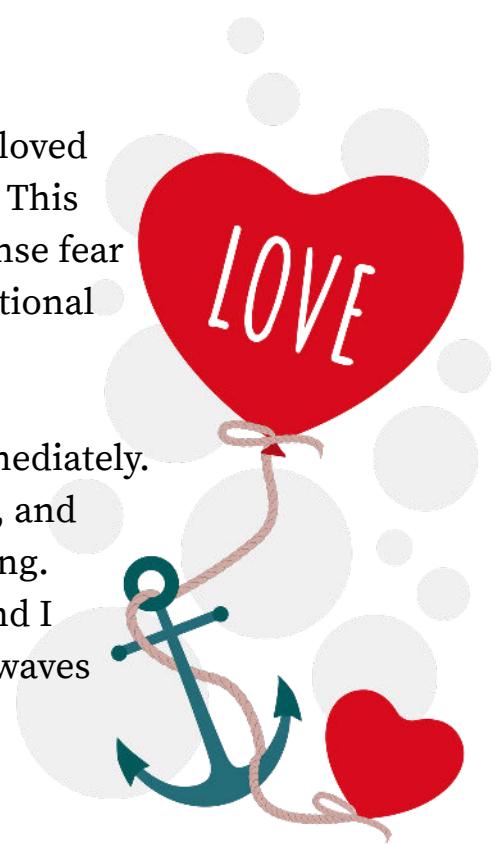
## The Overwhelming Tsunami

For a child with significant past trauma, the death of a loved one can trigger a tsunami of previous pains and losses. This can lead to regressive behaviors (like bedwetting), intense fear of abandonment, extreme acting out, or complete emotional numbness. This is a survival response.

**Caregiver Response:** Increase stability and routine immediately.

This is the time to lean on structure, predictable meals, and bedtime routines. Reassure them that you are not leaving.

“Our family is safe. I will be here when you wake up, and I will be here when you get home from school.” If these waves are constant or extreme, it is time to seek professional trauma-informed and trauma healing-focused therapy.



**Remember:** You cannot stop the waves, but you can be there to safely guide them to the shore. Your unwavering presence is the anchor that keeps them safe and secure during a grief-infused storm.

## Ways to Support Grieving Children

Peer support is essential because connecting with others who have experienced loss significantly reduces feelings of isolation. Look into bereavement support groups or children's grief camps. For children who lack the words to express huge feelings, expressive approaches such as art, journaling, music, or therapeutic play help them identify and externalize their feelings in a safe and healing way.

Grief doesn't disappear; it changes form. For a child who has a trauma history, their healing journey will be an ongoing journey of emotional highs and lows. Grief triggers can occur at any time, and that is where you can be there to provide them with unconditional love and support.

## **Understanding Long-Term Grief and Milestones**

Expect anniversary reactions—intense grief “waves”—around significant dates (birthdays, holidays, the death anniversary). Plan for these days by acknowledging them openly. Be aware that as your child grows, their developing understanding means they may experience grief and loss all over again, but with a deeper awareness and comprehension.

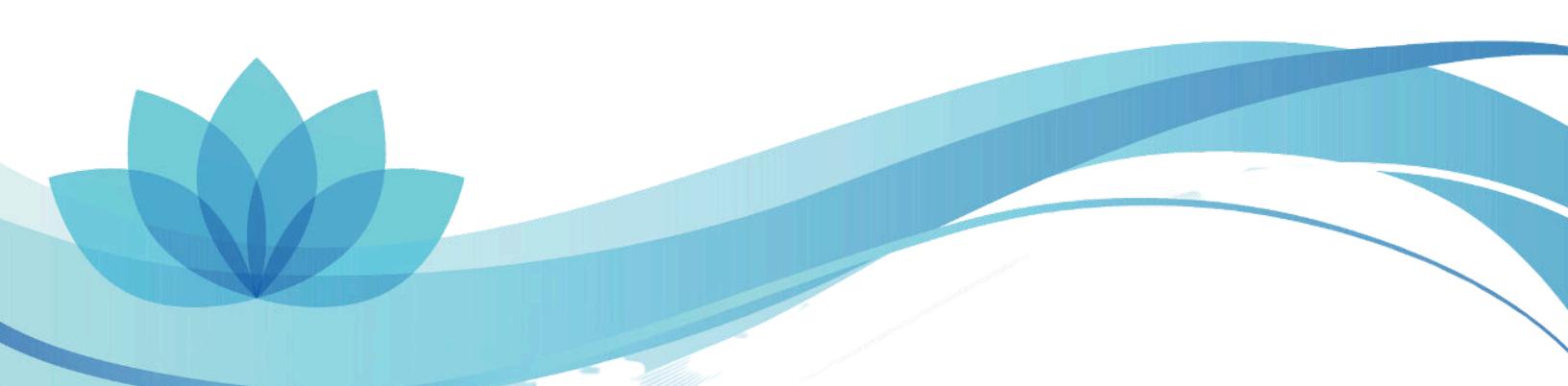
For children in care, a death can reinforce deep-rooted fears about attachment and abandonment. Continue to incorporate attachment-building tools (eye contact, physical closeness, empathy, reassurance) to reassure them that your bond is unconditionally secure.

## **The Caregiver’s Well-Being: Prioritizing Your Emotional Wellness**

You are the secure base, but being the anchor in a storm can be exhausting. Focusing on your own routines and good care practices. Emotional wellness is essential for you and your child’s grief healing.

Acknowledge and honor your own grief—you may be grieving the person or simply grieving for your child's immense pain. Prioritize scheduling time for yourself to recharge and refresh. Respite care is important so you can focus on your needs and be fully present when your child needs you.

Reach out to your support network, your family, friends, mentors, and a bereavement counselor to avoid carrying the emotional weight alone. In addition, model healthy coping skills by letting your child hear you say: “I feel sad today, so I’m going to take a walk to help my brain calm down. Would you like to join me?”



## When to Seek Professional Intervention

While every child's grief journey is unique, intense emotional symptoms that persist for six months or longer and severely impair functioning may signal Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) or a trauma reactivation that requires specialized bereavement support.

### **Red Flags: Seek Trauma-Informed Care**

Severe Functional Impairment: Inability to maintain routines, attend school, or participate in daily life.

Persistent Emotional Numbness/Detachment: A lasting inability to feel anything or connect with others.

#### Intense, Persistent Longing/Preoccupation:

The child is unable to focus on anything other than the deceased person.



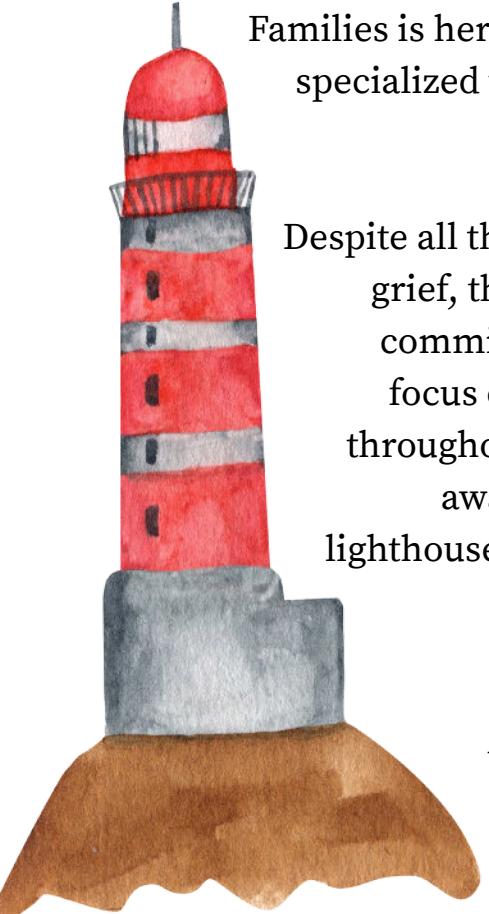
Self-Destructive Behaviors: Risk-taking, self-harm behaviors, or expressing suicidal ideation (seek emergency help immediately).

Extreme Social Withdrawal/Isolation from peers and family.

## Maintaining Hope During Traumatic Times

Navigating the death of a loved one when your child carries a history of trauma is undeniably complex and emotionally exhausting. The journey through complex grief is not a straight line, but rather an unpredictable path marked by unexpected twists and turns.

As their parent or caregiver, you do not have to carry this immense emotional weight by yourself. Support and resources are available to help both you and your child navigate these powerful waves. The Coalition for Children, Youth &



Families is here to offer critical support, guidance, and connections to specialized trauma-informed bereavement counselors and support groups.

Despite all the uncertainty and complexity associated with complex grief, there is profound hope. Your unwavering presence, your commitment to trauma-informed healing strategies, and your focus on creating felt safety will empower and guide children throughout their grief journeys toward healing. You cannot take away their grief, but you can serve as their anchor and the lighthouse, reinforcing the message that your child is safe, loved, and not alone.

You have the tools and the courage to guide your child through this storm. Reach out—we are ready to support you and your family on your journey, and our Resource Specialists will connect you to trauma-informed healing resources.

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# Resources

## From the Resource Library

- [Mental Health Resources for Foster, Adoptive & Kinship Families](#)
- [Virtual Resource Kit: Self-Care](#)
- [The Invisible String](#), by Patrice Karst
  - Excellent for children with abandonment fear, as it introduces the concept of an unbreakable, invisible connection to loved ones, even after death.
- [Final Gifts](#), by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley
- [Unfinished Business: When a Parent Dies](#)
  - A young person's life is forever changed when a parent dies. In this booklet, six foster teenagers describe the death of their father or mother (or both parents). They write about having to grow up quickly and begin their healing journey.

## Training from the Champion Classrooms

- [Mental Health 101: An Introduction to NAMI \(National Alliance on Mental Illness\) Wisconsin](#)
- [Healing Centered Engagement, the Power of Community and Connection](#)
- [Building Strong Relationships with Felt Safety](#)

## Statewide Grief and Loss/Bereavement Resources

- Crisis Intervention 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (Call/Text anytime)
- [211 Wisconsin](#)
  - This resource allows you to search for various local grief and bereavement services by entering your location.
- [National Alliance of Mental Illness \(NAMI\) of Wisconsin](#)
- [Agrace Grief Support Center](#)
- [Camp GLOW](#) (Giving Loved Ones Wings)
  - A free grief support day camp for children, ages 6-14, and their parent(s) and guardian(s)
- [Camp Hope](#)
  - A free weekend camp for grieving children, teenagers, and their families
- [Grief Support Resources from Children's Wisconsin](#)



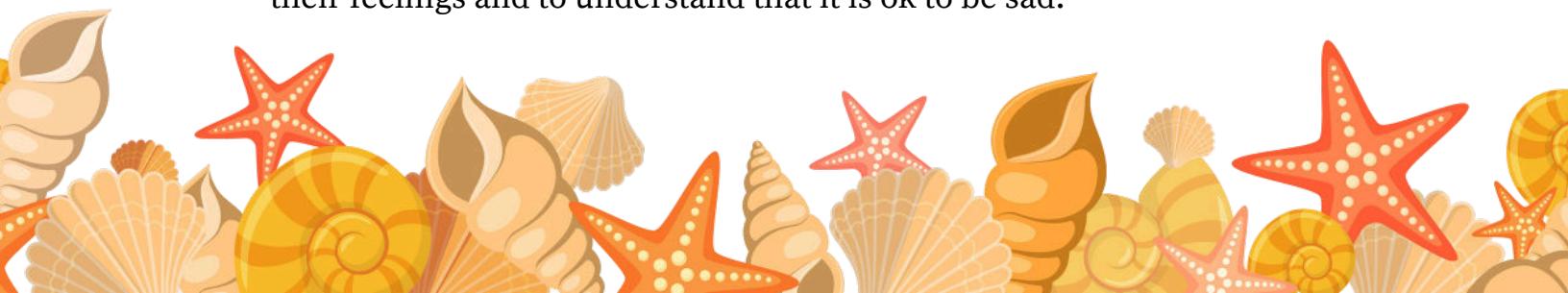
# Resources

## National Grief and Loss/Bereavement Resources

- [The Dougy Center, The National Grief Center for Children and Families](#)
- [National Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#)
- [Grief Camps](#)
- [Tragedy Assistance Program Support for Survivors \(TAPS—for Military Families\)](#)

## Books for Children, Tweens, and Teens Focused on Grief and Loss

- [The Memory Box: A Book About Grief](#), by Joanna Rowland
  - Provides a concrete activity (creating a memory box) and addresses the fear of forgetting a loved one.
- [Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death](#), by Bonnie Zucker
  - This book is intended to be read to two- and three-year-old children to help them understand death and process the loss of a loved one. When a loved one dies, it can be hard to know how to explain it to a young child, particularly if you are grieving the loss yourself. Written at a developmental level appropriate for two- and three-year-olds, the story explains death, lets children know it is okay to feel sad, and reassures them that they can still love the person who died and that the person who died will always love them.
- [I Miss You: A First Look at Death](#), by Pat Thomas
  - A gentle, trusted picture book for helping children (ages 4–7) understand death, grief, and hope—recommended by parents, teachers, and child therapists worldwide. When someone close to a child dies, finding the right words can feel impossible. *I Miss You: A First Look at Death* offers clear, age-appropriate language and warm, inclusive illustrations to guide families through conversations about loss and healing. Written by child psychotherapist Pat Thomas, this standout title provides honest answers to children's toughest questions—never frightening, always supportive.
- [The Goodbye Book](#), by Ruby Kalyani
  - This children's book helps children process the natural feelings that come with losing someone they love. This book empowers children to explore their feelings and to understand that it is ok to be sad.



## Resources

- [Grief Relief for Tweens and Teens: Workbook and Journal](#), by Dr. Vernessa Blackwell
  - Losing someone or something important can be overwhelming—especially for tweens and teens who are still learning how to navigate big emotions. Grief Relief for Tweens and Teens is a compassionate 12-week program designed to guide young hearts through the process of grief, offering faith-based encouragement, practical exercises, and emotional support along the way.
  - Written by grief coach and bestselling author Dr. Vernessa Blackwell, this interactive workbook helps young readers understand their feelings, find strength in faith, and embrace healing. Through relatable stories, scripture-based reflections, and journaling prompts, this book empowers young people to express their emotions, work through grief in a healthy way, and discover joy again.
  - Whether your child is dealing with the loss of a loved one, a friendship, or a significant life change, this book provides a supportive roadmap to hope and resilience.
- [Helping Teens Cope with Death](#)
  - This practical guide covers the unique grief responses of teenagers and the specific challenges they face when grieving a death. You will learn how death impacts teenagers and ways that you can help them. The book also offers advice from parents and caregivers of bereaved teens on supporting adolescents and determining when professional help is needed.





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