

Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss

Grief is a normal reaction to change brought about by loss- whether a loved one, a pet, a home, a community, or a way of life. Across the nation many of today's children have been exposed to loss related to natural disasters, such as the recent fires in California, or war or other traumatic events. Whether experiencing these events directly or indirectly, a child's world can be turned upside-down with sense of loss, stress, and concerns about safety.

Children feel grief just as intensely as adults but may not have the cognitive or emotional coping skills that adults have, nor do they always have the words to frame their feelings and reactions. Some children whose feelings of grief and loss are extremely strong may show no emotion, act out in other ways, or may exhibit seemingly inappropriate behavior (e.g. making jokes, or laughing at inopportune times). These children need assistance in dealing with their pain just as much as the children who show their sadness more openly. Here are some ways you can help children deal with grief:

- Children need to have the opportunity to talk openly about their grief and sadness, as well as their fears. They must be reassured that the emotions they are feeling are valid and normal. Conversations with adults about feelings and concerns should be ongoing.
- Some children may feel guilty about being alive or OK when a loved one is dead or affected by a disaster. Children need to be reassured that they had no role in the events, and that there was nothing that they could have done to prevent them. They need to know that they were not at fault.
- Answer children's questions honestly, simply, and in age-appropriate ways. Listen to what the child is really asking.
- Share your own sadness and grief but remember that children need the stability and strength that adults can provide. Keep in mind that children take cues from non-verbal communication as well as the spoken word.
- Share memorial preparations with children and allow them to participate as much as they care to. The reality of the services and the comfort of the rituals can help them heal. However, children who are afraid to participate in a service or funeral should not be forced to do so.
- Give children outlets to let go of anger and stress. Sports, hobbies, physical play, and the arts are good methods for children to cope.
- Allow children to feel they can have an active role in rebuilding community, whether it is through making family decisions, helping others, or taking action to prevent future loss through emergency preparedness.
- Watch for difficulties such as nightmares, separation anxieties, reversion to babyish behaviors, withdrawal, and intense anger. Set aside some time to help the child explore their feelings and thoughts. If a child's grief and anger persist and interfere with daily activities, professional help may be needed.
- Choose what a child is exposed to carefully and provide an opportunity to discuss what is seen by the child.

How to handle a conversation

Girl Scouts welcomes and serves youth and families from a wide spectrum of faiths and cultures. When they wish to participate in discussions or activities that could be considered

sensitive—even for some—put the topic on hold until you have spoken with the parents and received guidance from your council.

When Girl Scout activities involve sensitive issues, your role is that of a caring adult volunteer who can help them acquire skills and knowledge in a supportive atmosphere, not someone who advocates a particular position.

To help navigate the conversation, Girl Scouts of North East Ohio would like to extend an offer for resources for any troop that has experienced a loss. This resource from [Sesame Street](#) is helpful when younger youths are experiencing a loss. We would like to offer a copy of [The Invisible String](#), and a corresponding [workbook](#) full of activities dealing with separation/loss. Specific pages that are recommended include:

- “When I Miss You” – page 60
- “Strings From Above” – page 68
- “Hearts From Above” – page 74

If you are interested in a free copy of the book and/or workbook. receiving a copy please send an [email to Volunteer Relations](#). GSNEO will also send a card to the troop/group and include green heart patches for all members to help honor the member(s).

Girl Scouts recognize that experiencing a loss may expose youths to issues and discussions that are, or could be, considered to be of a sensitive or controversial nature. There is no definitive list of sensitive issues, but possible examples include substance abuse, child abuse, puberty/human sexuality, violence, youth suicide and religion. We believe parents and caregivers, along with schools and faith communities, are the primary sources of information on these topics.

Parents/caregivers make all decisions regarding their child’s participation in the Girl Scout program that may be of a sensitive nature. As a volunteer, you must get written parental permission for any locally planned program offering that could be considered sensitive. Included on the permission form should be the topic of the activity, any specific content that might create controversy, and any action steps the Girl Scouts will take when the activity is complete. Be sure to have a form for each troop member and keep the forms on hand in case a problem arises. For activities not sponsored by Girl Scouts, find out in advance (from organizers or other volunteers who may be familiar with the content) what will be presented, and follow your council’s guidelines for obtaining written permission.

To learn more about how GSNEO handles Sensitive Topics, see our Sensitive Topics Best Practices and Release forms. [Sensitive Issues Consent Form](#)

Memorialization

To honor those who have passed away there are many paths. Your troop or group could:

- Light a candle
- Plant flowers
- Blow bubbles
- Scouts’ Own Honoring Ceremony
- Make a video
- Create a memory book or box

GSNEO has unique memorialization/dedication opportunities. This can include purchasing [a brick paver](#), purchasing a [memorial bench](#), or dedicating [Memorial and Honor Trees Order Form](#) all of which can be placed at any of the GSNEO Camp properties.

Recommended Resources

- [When I Feel Afraid](#), by Cheri J. Meiners, Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 2003. Ages 4-8. – or hear it read aloud on [YouTube](#)
- [What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?](#) By Trevor Romain. MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 1999. Ages 5-10.
- [Good Grief for Kids, A Journal to Help Children Cope with their Grief](#), by Katherine Dorn Zotovich. Ages 9-12.
- [What to Do When You're Scared and Worried](#), by James J. Crispt, Ph.D Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 2004. Ages 8-15.
- [When a Friend Dies, A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing](#), by Marilyn E. Gootman. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 2005. Ages 11 and up.
- National Institute of Mental Health: Coping with Traumatic Events: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events/>
- [Life and Loss – A guide to help grieving children](#), by Linda Goldman, Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, England, UK, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 3rd edition
- [Breaking the Silence A guide to helping children with complicated grief](#), by Linda Goldman, by Linda Goldman, Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, England, UK, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2nd edition
- [How Children Understand Death: What to Say When a Loved One Dies](#), HealthyChildren.org, from the American Academy of Pediatrics, by David J. Schonfeld, MD
- [Helping Children Deal with Grief](#), from Child Mind Institute, by Rachel Ehmke
- [Grief and Children](#), by American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
- [Grief a Sesame Street Workshop Resource](#)
- [When a Pet Dies: How to help your Child Cope](#), HealthyChildren.org, from the American Academy of Pediatrics, by Dispeh Navsaria, MPH
- Sesame Street Grief Resources <https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/grief/>