

| THINK |

Helping Children Deal with Grief & Loss

by Kari Sutton



When your child loses someone or something close to them it can be a challenging time. Loss is a part of life, and you can't protect them from the pain, but you can help them build healthy coping skills. Children may experience grief over the death of a family member or friend, the death of a family pet, parents separating, loss of a friendship, or a loss related to a crisis such as a fire, flood, accident or COVID.

How children understand and express loss will depend on their age, developmental stage, past experiences and their connection with what they've lost. Grief is not an easy emotion to sit with and it's hard for us to see our children grieving and experiencing a wide range of negative emotions all jumbled up together. The following suggestions will provide you with practical strategies and ways to respond that will help children who are experiencing grief and loss.

Be honest

When we are talking with our children about the death of a loved one or friend, we need to deliver the news in a truthful age-appropriate way using simple, clear language. Don't volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. Instead, try to answer their questions as honestly and clearly as you can. It's okay if you can't answer everything; being available to your child is what matters.

Acknowledge, validate and empathise

It's appropriate and healthy for children to express whatever emotions they are feeling. Many children aren't able to express their emotions through words and may find drawing pictures, building a scrapbook, looking at photo albums, or telling stories more therapeutic. When our children are upset, they need to know we have heard them, that we acknowledge what they're feeling and that it is ok to feel that way. Encourage children to express what they're thinking and feeling in the days, weeks, and months following the loss. Talk about your own feelings, it helps children be aware of and feel comfortable with theirs. Then

simply sit there with them, supporting them or giving them space if they need it to process their emotions.

Figure out what makes them feel better

Once children have vented their feelings, provide the comfort they need but don't dwell on sad feelings. After a few minutes of talking and listening, shift to an activity or topic that helps them feel a little better. Find time to do enjoyable things together - play, make art, cook, or go somewhere in nature together. Let them know it's ok to play, be happy and have fun even when something sad has happened.

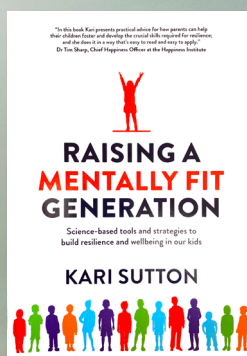
Talking to God

We draw strength and comfort through our relationship with God. We know that we never truly walk alone and can call on God in our times of need. Share with your children how God has helped you through difficult times and let them know about God's love and grace that blesses all of our lives. Encourage your children to talk with God through prayer at bedtime, or other times throughout the day, encouraging them to think of all the good things about the person they have lost and how that person is now in heaven with God. Allow them to express how they're feeling and let them know that God understands, loves them dearly and is holding them in the palm of his hand.

Books to share

There are many good children's books about dealing with grief, loss and death. Reading these books together can be a great way to start a conversation with your child. Here are some suggestions:

I Miss You: A First Look at Death – Pat Thomas, *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* - Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen, *Grandma's Scrapbook* – Josephine Nobisso, *The Invisible String* – Patrice Karst, *When Your Pet Dies* – Diane Pomerance, *If Nathan Were Here* – Mary Bahr, *Always* by Caron Levis, *Chester the Raccoon and the Acorn Full of Memories* – Audrey Penn, *The Memory Box* – Joanna Rowland,



Kari Sutton is a researcher, educator, author and speaker who has helped over 25,000 parents, educators and other people who care for kids plant the seeds of resilience and emotional wellbeing for future generations.

You can purchase her book through her website and get a signed copy <https://mentallyfitgeneration.com>