

Understanding Children's Grief




Michael's Place
let the healing begin

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Understanding Children's Grief

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Factors that Impact the Grief Process



How children or teens grieve after experiencing the death of someone significant in their life will depend on many factors, including:

- Age/Gender
- Relationship with the person who died
- Personality
- How they usually react to stress and emotion
- Developmental Stage
- Earlier experiences of loss or death
- Amount of support around them
- How others around them are grieving
- Family circumstances

A Developmental Perspective

Grief is a complex emotion, and it affects children differently than adults. Moreover, children's reactions to grief vary from one child to another and evolve over time as they reach different developmental milestones.

To better understand how children process grief, it's essential to consider the following developmental stages:

- Birth - 2 years old
- 3 - 5 years old
- 5 - 8 years old
- 9 - 12 years old
- Teens



Birth – 2 Years Old



Concept of Death

No understanding of death

Sees it as reversible, not permanent

Aware of the absence of loved one

Notices changes in routines and the emotions of the family

Grief Response

- Misses sight, sounds, smells, and contact with loved one
- May have anxiety and fear of being abandoned
- Looks for the person who died

Signs of Distress

- Physical changes, including weight loss
- Being quiet and less responsive
- Regressive behavior

Emotions & Behaviors

- Crying
- Sickliness
- Clinging
- Throwing
- Sucking
- Biting
- Sleeplessness

Ways to Offer Support

- Keep routines and activities as consistent as possible
- Physical comfort (hold and cuddle them)
- Speak and behave calmly and gently
- Provide items of comfort (stuffed animal, soft blanket, etc.)

3 – 5 Years Old



Concept of Death

Death is reversible, not permanent

To be dead is to be "sleeping" or "away"

May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies

Magical thinking and fantasies that are often worse than reality

Grief Response

- Intense, but brief outbursts
- Most aware of changes in routines and care
- Interested in dead things
- May act as if death didn't happen
- Repetitive questioning
- Looking for person who died

Signs of Distress

- Regression
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Bedwetting

Emotions & Behaviors

- Plays out scene of death, change, and feelings
- Physical complaints
- Sadness/Crying
- Irritability/Fighting
- Insecurity
- Confusion
- Fear/Worry

Ways to Offer Support

- Keep routines and activities as consistent as possible
- Provide physical comfort, hugs
- Speak and behave calmly and gently
- Reassure them that they are safe and cared for
- Be honest about your emotions and validate theirs
- Encourage play

5 – 8 Years Old



Concept of Death

May still see death as reversible, but beginning to grasp the concept of finality

May see death as a punishment

Think their thoughts or actions caused the death

Forming spiritual concepts

Grief Response

- Repetitive questioning
- May focus on the dying process - How? Why?
- Intense responses mixed with acting as if nothing happened

Signs of Distress

- Regression
- Nightmares
- Sleeping and/or eating disturbances
- Violent play

Emotions & Behaviors

- Crying/Sadness
- Anger/Irritability
- Loneliness
- Fear/Anxiety
- Withdrawal
- Confusion
- Guilt

Ways to Offer Support

- Keep routines and activities consistent
- Reassure them - provide physical comfort
- Allow questions and answer honestly
- Speak and behave calmly around them
- Provide opportunities for decision-making
- Encourage play/creative outlets
- Be honest about your emotions and validate theirs

9 – 12 Years Old



Concept of Death

Understands that death is permanent

May think about the future impact

Focus on biology – what happens to the body when you die

Concerns that their thoughts or actions caused the death

Forming spiritual concepts

Grief Response

- Specific questions and desire for details
- Concerned with how others are grieving and their own personal grief response
- Talks about the physical aspects of illness or death

Emotions & Behaviors

- Shock/Confusion
- Sadness
- Anger/Irritability
- Loneliness/Abandonment
- Fear/Anxiety
- Guilt
- Concentration difficulties
- Nightmares/Sleep changes

Signs of Distress

- Regressive behaviors
- Mood fluctuations/Aggressive acting out
- Withdrawal/Isolation
- Extreme academic changes
- Suicidal thoughts/Self-harm

Ways to Offer Support

- Allow questions and answer honestly
- Encourage connection with a trusted adult mentor
- Provide opportunities for decision-making
- Regular reassurance – verbally and through physical comfort
- Honest communication/Validation of emotions

Teens



Concept of Death

Death is final and universal

High death awareness (may happen again)

May utilize spiritual concepts to cope

Conflict between independence & dependence

Words/actions may have caused the death

Grief Response

- Increased risk-taking
- Attempts to take on caregiver role
- More often willing to talk to others outside of family
- Adult approach
- Traditional mourning
- Feeling different from peers

Signs of Distress

- Impulsive/Risk-taking behaviors
- Drug and alcohol use
- Aggressive acting out/Non-compliance
- Extreme changes in academics/Interests
- Suicidal thoughts/Self-harm
- Isolation/Withdrawal/Depression

Emotions & Behaviors

- Shock/Confusion
- Sadness
- Anger/Irritability
- Loneliness
- Abandonment
- Fear/Anxiety
- Guilt
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares & Sleep changes

Ways to Offer Support

- Promote honest and open communication
- Be willing to listen and acknowledge emotions
- Encourage connection with a trusted adult or peer for support
- Avoid placing adult responsibilities on them
- Provide outlets for remembering their loved one
- Encourage healthy, creative activities to cope with the loss

Supporting a Grieving Child

As children grow and gain a better understanding of death, their grief may resurface even years later. They rely on caregivers and trusted adults for support in processing their grief.



- Be honest with your child.
- Maintain open communication, listen without judgment, and answer questions honestly.
- Maintain consistent rules and boundaries. Children gain security when they have clear expectations.
- Children may use their grief to excuse inappropriate behavior. While it's important to acknowledge and validate the pain they are experiencing, it's still important to hold them accountable for their actions.
- Be honest about your emotions and validate theirs.
- Reassure them that they are not alone and that there is support for them as they process their feelings.
- Encourage play and healthy, creative outlets to express their feelings.
- Include them in creating rituals and new family traditions that help them honor and remember their loved one.
- Involve them in planning funeral/memorial services.

When to Seek Additional Support

When a child or teen is showing any signs of distress, seeking support from a medical or mental health professional is recommended

Signs of Distress

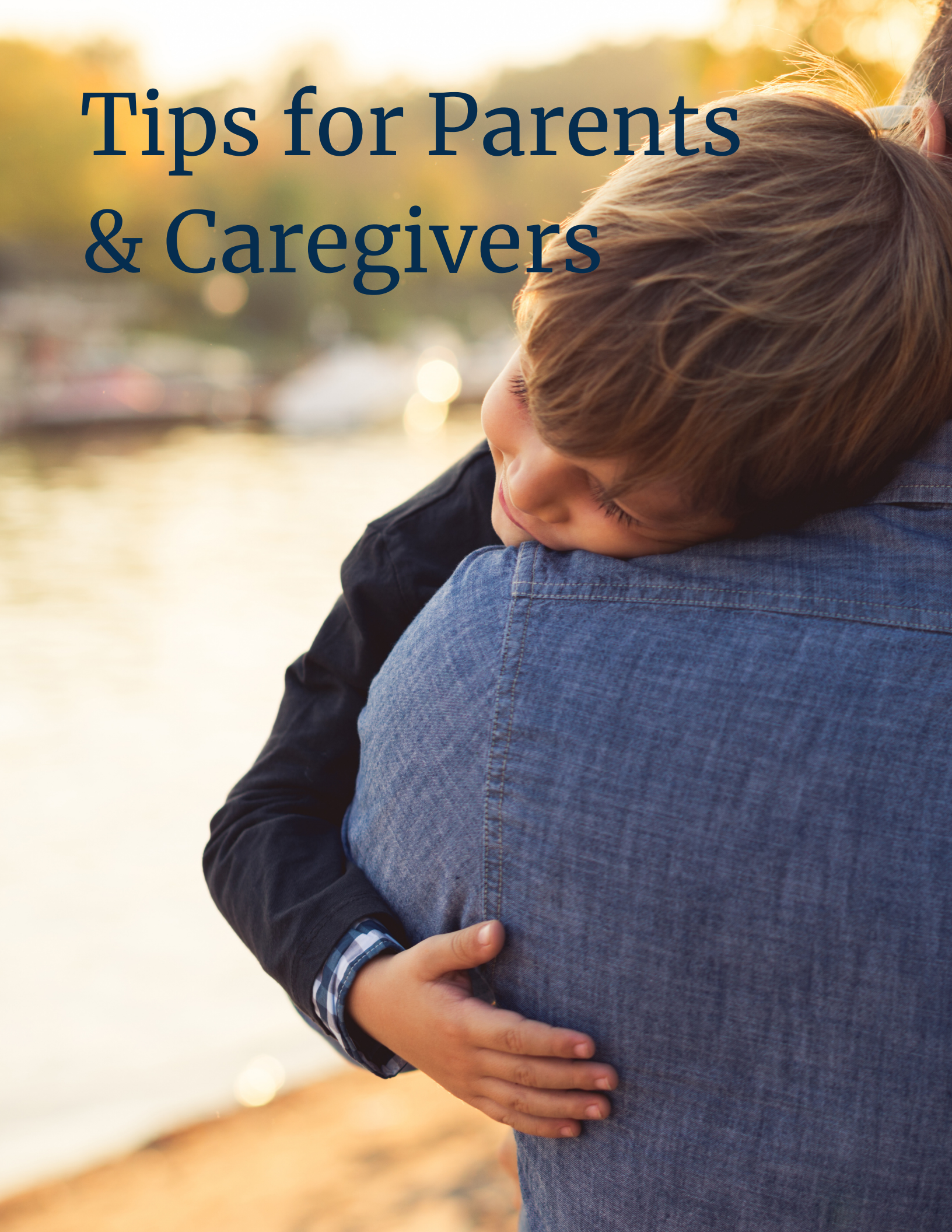
- Significant changes in behavior, acting out, or personality changes
- Academic changes, dropping grades, and attendance issues that don't begin to improve after several weeks
- Self-destructive and high-risk behaviors, such as drug use
- Self-harm or suicidal ideation
- Isolation/Withdrawal
- Depression/Apathy
- Any symptoms that significantly interfere with the child's normal functioning after several weeks



Need Crisis Support Now?

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org for free crisis support 24/7.

Tips for Parents & Caregivers



Tips for Parents & Caregivers

Making self-care a priority is crucial to physical and emotional health, improving your ability to support and care for your children. Taking time for yourself does not mean you are neglecting your children, it means balancing your needs so you have the capacity to support them.

Prioritizing Your Health & Wellness

Express Your Emotions

Both you and your children will benefit from implementing healthy ways to express your emotions. This allows you to serve as a role model as they learn to navigate through their own emotions.

Surround Yourself with a Strong Support System

Each of your support people should fall into one of the following categories: listeners, doers, or respite providers. The “listener” is someone who can hold space and listen without judgement or giving advice. The “doer” is a person you can count on to assist you with tasks, such as: grocery shopping, running errands, picking up the kids, making meals, etc. The “respite provider” is someone you can call upon for distraction, humor, or to get you out of the house. Once you’ve identified their natural strength, then you are able to lean on them in more supportive ways.

**Parenting Tips Adapted from National Alliance for Children’s Grief
and WhatsYourGrief.com/parenting-grieving/*

Tips for Parents & Caregivers

Develop a Self-Kindness Plan

Grief is a deeply personal experience and there is no easy way to navigate it. Learn ways to treat yourself with kindness and compassion throughout each day. Prioritize your physical and emotional well-being. Give yourself encouragement and grace.

Implement Healthy Coping Skills

Find a handful of “tools” that you can pull out in times of need: physical activities (walking, sports, working out), artistic expression (music, dance, painting), comfort items (stuffed animals, pets, blankets), and mindfulness (yoga, prayer, meditation) are a few suggestions. These can be done by yourself or together as a family.

Important Note:

Your children are learning ways to cope and grieve from watching you and their surroundings. While it's important for you to be open and honest with your child, be sure you are not leaning on them to become your main support. As much as you are able, encourage them to keep being children and reduce the role of them becoming a co-parent.

**Parenting Tips Adapted from National Alliance for Children's Grief
and WhatsYourGrief.com/parenting-grieving/*

About Michael's Place

Located in Traverse City, Michigan, Michael's Place serves grieving children, teens, adults, and families throughout northern Michigan with innovative and compassionate grief support programs.

Michael's Place offers a community of support and understanding. Our programs are designed to help reduce the feeling of isolation while providing valuable resources and coping skills to help navigate the grief journey.

Visit our website for a list of our support groups, community events, and educational workshops, as well as for further grief information and resources.

Michael's Place
1212 Veterans Dr., Suite 100
Traverse City, MI 49684
231-947-6453
GoodGrief@MyMichaelsPlace.net
www.MyMichaelsPlace.net

Additional Grief Resources

**Children's Grief
Awareness Day**
childrensgriefawarenessday.org

**Coalition to Support Grieving
Students**
grievingstudents.org

Eluna Network
elunanetwork.org

**National Alliance for
Children's Grief**
nacg.org

**National Center for School
Crisis & Bereavement**
schoolcrisiscenter.org

What's Your Grief
whatsyourgrief.com



Michael's Place

let the healing begin

*Michael's Place serves the bereavement needs of
the greater community through support,
advocacy, and education.*

Thank You To All Who Support Michael's Place



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