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When Your Child's Friend Dies

The death of a friend is a very painful event for children. Here's how to help your child cope with the loss.

By **Tamekia Reece**

It's hard to wrap your mind around the idea that a child you know has died. When that child was your child's friend, it's even more devastating. And as you deal with your own feelings about the loss, you have to explain it to your kid. Help him cope by following these steps.

Share the News Choose a quiet and unhurried time and setting. Your child will need your support, so make sure you're calm. Keep the conversation simple and age appropriate, along the lines of "Something sad happened to your friend Ben. He was really sick and he died last night." You may have to explain what "died" means for young children who don't yet understand death. "For example, you could say, 'Sometimes, people get very sick-with a special kind of sickness-that can't get better and their bodies stop working,'" says Marla W. Deibler, Psy.D., a psychologist and executive director of the Center for Emotional Health of Greater Philadelphia, LLC. If illness didn't cause the child's death, you might say, "Amber was in a car accident and her body stopped working." Be careful not to share explicit details of the child's death.

Kids will be very concerned with how the friend's death will affect them, so it's also important to make it clear to them what they can

expect, says Michelle P. Maidenberg, Ph.D., clinical director of Westchester Group Works, in Harrison, New York. Explain that the two of them will no longer have playdates, or the friend won't be able to attend birthday parties, or that your child won't see her friend at [school](#) anymore, Dr. Maidenberg says.

Comfort Your Child Allow her to express her emotions freely. Hug her tightly and hold her while she cries. Let her know it's okay for her to feel sad or mad. Then share some of your own feelings: "I feel really bad about what happened to Amber. I'm going to miss her and I know you will too." Encourage her to ask questions, and then answer them honestly and simply. Let her know you're there for her anytime she has questions or needs to talk to someone.

Offer Reassurance One of your child's worries, whether he voices it or not, will be that something similar will happen to him or to a loved one. "It's important to reinforce to the child that he is safe and so are his loved ones," Dr. Maidenberg says. If the friend died because of illness and your child is concerned about his own health, Dr. Maidenberg suggests you say, "Most kids your age don't die. There are a very few who, unfortunately, have illnesses or accidents, but most kids grow up and live until they're past Grandma's age." If a tragic accident caused the friend's death, focus on the ways your

family tries to stay safe, by following the speed limit, always wearing a seatbelt in the car, and looking both ways before crossing the street.

Prepare for the EmotionsA friend's death always causes emotional turmoil. For kids, it's even worse because they may not fully understand what's going on and this may be the first time they hear about a child dying. Your child might feel sad, angry, confused, shocked, depressed, or a number of other emotions. Some children go through of a period of denial, and younger kids may show regressive behavior, such as [bedwetting](#), thumb-sucking or wanting to sleep in the parents' room. To help you and your young child understand his feelings, read books together like *The Grief Bubble: Helping Kids Explore and Understand Grief* by Kerry DeBay and *Why Did You Die?: Activities to Help Children Cope with Grief and Loss* by Ellen Goldring and Erika Leeuwenburgh. For preteens and [teens](#), *When a Friend Dies: A Book for [Teens](#) About Grieving & Healing* by Marilyn E. Gootman Ed.D. can help them better cope with confusing and painful emotions.

Help Her Say GoodbyeWhen a child's friend dies, many parents struggle with the decision to allow the child to attend the funeral. The ceremony may help your child process her friend's death, but make sure you consider your child's personality. If she's very sensitive or has difficulty seeing others express extreme emotions, it may be best

to keep her home. She can say goodbye or remember her friend by later placing a flower on the grave, making a scrapbook of the two of them, sharing stories about her friend, or writing a goodbye letter to her deceased friend.

Seek Help How long your child grieves depends on his age and his relationship with the deceased friend. Allow your kid to go through the process at his own pace, but don't overlook signs of trouble. Some red flags: problems with daily functioning, such as sleeping and eating, social isolation, extreme changes in academic performance and/or refusal to attend [school](#), aggression, lack of interest in activities he once enjoyed, hyperfocusing on death or [talking](#) about being with the deceased friend. If you notice these signs, Dr. Maidenberg says, your child may need help to cope with the loss.

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to attend or not to attend the funeral

"They didn't let me go to the funeral. They said I was too young. I'm still mad." - Paul, 8.

People often wonder at what age a child should attend a funeral. Age is not the most important consideration. Generally speaking, young children don't seem to have the fear of the deceased or dead bodies adults think they do. What works well is to invite children or teenagers to the funeral, without forcing them to make a particular decision. Children who are not allowed to attend a funeral may feel they didn't get their chance to say goodbye. On the other hand, children who were forced to attend a funeral may feel resentful. Children should not be criticized if they don't want to attend the funeral. They may regret the decisions they make, but they won't have the added issue of resentment for not being allowed to make their own choice.

In order to make their choice, children need explanations and information about what a funeral is and what is going to happen. After a death, the world as they know it is completely changed. Additional surprises and unfamiliar situations can complicate the grieving process. Not unlike adults, kids like to be filled in on the basics of who, what, where, when and why. Kids also expect us to be clear, direct and concrete in our explanations. Teenagers appreciate this too. They are experts at discerning when adults are beating around the bush. When explaining the events of a funeral to child, it's best to "tell it like it is." Typical aspects of the funeral that may be discussed include:

Who... will be at the funeral or memorial service?

What... is going to happen?

Where... will the service take place?

When... will the funeral happen?

Why... are we doing this?

What happens, or doesn't happen, at a funeral will be remembered forever by a child. Parents and other caregivers have the opportunity to influence a child's experience by including children in the one way they most deserve and request: informed choice.