

# Helping Young Children with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers

Each child grieves in his or her unique way. After a death that occurs under traumatic circumstances, some young children develop traumatic grief responses, making it hard to cope with their loss. Here are ways to recognize and help young child with traumatic grief.

## I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT:

1. Even though I am a very young, I miss the person and get very sad.
2. My feelings change a lot. Sometimes I am sad and other times I like to have fun.
3. I do not understand that when someone dies they are gone and can never come back.
4. Sometimes I worry that I will die or that you will not come back if you leave. I might cry and cling to you at bedtime or going to school.
5. My upset feelings might come out as physical reactions like tummy aches and headaches or as behavior problems like not listening or fighting. Sometimes I may act like a baby by sucking my thumb or wetting my bed or my clothes.
6. Sometimes over and over I keep playing how the person died (like making my toy cars crash or having bad guys shooting) to try to understand it.
7. I may not want to talk about the person who died because it's too hard or because I don't want to make you cry.
8. I may not like to do things or go places that remind me of the person who died.
9. I may think the person who died did not come back because he is mad at me or that it was my fault. I might worry that if I do something wrong (like not follow the rules) someone else will die.
10. I may worry I can't remember things about the person who died and what we did together.

## YOU CAN HELP ME WHEN YOU:

1. Teach me to talk about my feelings with words. Tell me it is OK to be sad and that you get sad too. Be careful not to get too upset around me, because it might make me worry.
2. Try to understand me and get it right and when you tell me you understand how I feel and that it is OK.
3. Remind me quietly that the person cannot come back—even if I ask over and over again. Don't say things to grownups that will scare me or confuse me because I do hear you, even if you don't think I do.
4. Tell me that you will keep us safe. Tell me when you leave that you will always come back and give me a picture of us or a note in my lunchbox to remind me that you will be back. Remind me that I can always feel better when I cuddle my blanket or teddy bear. Help me relax at bedtime by reading stories or listening to music.
5. Help me do things to feel calmer, get back to my routines and activities, and have fun again.
6. Help me understand the death with words I can understand. Tell me the truth simply without scary details. Do not let me see pictures of what happened if it is on the news.
7. Don't get mad if I don't want to talk about the person who died yet.
8. Tell me that you understand that it is too hard right now for me to do things or go places that remind me. Tell me that it won't always be this hard.
9. Reassure me that the death was not my fault, and I did not make it happen. Explain that the person who died loved me and would come back if she could, but when people die they cannot come back.
10. Keep pictures of the person who died around for me to see. Tell me stories about the person and make me a memory book so I can keep the person in my mind and my heart.

If you are worried about how your child is doing or if any of these problems get in the way of your child having fun, going to school, being with friends, or other functioning, go with your child to a mental health professional with expertise in treating traumatized children.