



Questions Grieving Children Ask

“Who will die next?”

“Who else will die?”

“Why did they leave me?”

“Who will take care of me?”

“Is it my fault?”

“Are they coming back?”

“What should I say to my friends?”

“Why did they die?”

“Do they remember me?”

“Were they mad at me?”

“Why did this happen to me?”

“Is it my responsibility to take care of my family now?”

“Who am I now?”



While children can react to the death of a loved one in many ways, one common reaction is trying to understand what happened and why. Looking for answers is a search for meaning about something that often feels senseless. In this process, children will often have many questions. And often, we will be stuck without answers.

Even though there may be no answers to some questions, there *are* some things that can be kept in mind as we think about responding to them. Most importantly, we can remember that when a child comes to us with questions, supporting and affirming him or her is more important than having the “right” answers.

Connecting with a Grieving Child

Truly connecting with a child is always important, but it is especially so when the child is grieving.

When a grieving child asks a question, ultimately the conversation that results—the connection made with the child—is more important than the answer.

We need to remember that the child has had a loved one die, that their life has changed dramatically. They’re broken-hearted. They’re afraid. And they usually feel all alone in these feelings.

What the child wants most—to have the person alive and with them again—cannot be. To truly support a child in grief, it’s important to allow a child to be “not OK” without trying to “fix” them.

We can’t make everything OK for the child, but we can support them, we can hear them, we can love them. Responses to questions posed by a child in grief can deepen our connection with that child. The aim is to create a situation in which the child feels safe enough to ask further questions, now and in the future, and to have the child know that we are there for them to talk to.

Listening to a Grieving Child

All children need to feel listened to and heard. Being listened to—and *feeling* listened to—is one of the most important ways that we all feel cared for and valued.

A child experiencing the overwhelming feelings of grief especially needs to know that they are being listened to and heard.

It is important to listen with our hearts as well as our heads, in a non-judgmental, accepting way.

We need to:

- Listen to the child's question
- Listen to the feelings behind the child's question
- Listen to the *child* himself or herself

The grieving child asking these hard questions needs our full attention. We need to stop whatever else it is we're doing, and be fully present, not allowing ourselves to be distracted by other things.

Truly listening means paying attention, without preparing our answers while the child is speaking, as well as being open to their feelings, their pain, their sorrow.

The goal of this listening is to have the child feel heard and understood and validated.



Validating a Grieving Child

When someone dies, a child often feels many things at once. This can be confusing and overwhelming. Most of all, it's scary. On top of that, often the feelings are new to them and this just increases the fear.

The child asking these questions needs to have his or her feelings validated—the child himself or herself needs to be validated.

In responding to questions, we need to remember that supporting and affirming the child is more important than providing answers.

It is important for a grieving child to get a sense from us that it's OK to ask these questions, that we're not shocked or upset or angry that they're dealing with these hard things.

To validate and support a grieving child asking difficult questions, we can respond in ways like this:

- "What you're thinking (or feeling) is normal."
- "You are OK."
- "It's natural (or normal) to feel that way."

What we don't want is to minimize their feelings by saying things like this:

- "You shouldn't feel like that."
- "Don't worry."
- "That's silly."

It's very common not to know what to say in answer to some of these questions. Some options of what we could say when we don't know what to say are:

- "I don't know. I've often wondered about that myself. (Let's talk about it)."
- "Tell me more about how you are feeling (or what you are thinking)."
- We can also repeat back to the child what they said, in our own words.



Questions Grieving Children Ask, and How We Might Respond to Them

1. Who else will die? Who will die next?

What the child seeks through this question is often not answers, but reassurance.

The factually correct answer to the question is that anyone *could* die at any moment. The child already knows that. What they need is evidence that in the midst of this terrifying knowledge they are not alone. They need someone's presence with them. The grieving child needs to know that they are not alone in this world.

Oftentimes, this question is immediately connected with the following question.


2. Who will take care of me?

"If Dad could die, then Mom can die too. And if Mom dies, *then who will take care of me?*"

This question is among those that we hear most often at the Caring Place. The fear and anxiety woven into it is clear—that the child will be left alone, helpless in the world.

If one parent has died, and the child asks this of the surviving parent, what can you say? The child needs reassurance most of all. None of us can honestly say, "I will never die." And yet to answer on the simple factual level—"We could all die at any time."—could well compound the fear that already exists.

Although we can't truthfully say that we will never die, we can speak truthfully about our intentions. We can say, "I intend to be here with you until you are all grown up and you have your own kids and I am old. **I intend to keep you safe. I intend to take care of you.**" That reassurance is what the child seeks, and needs.



"In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers."

—Fred Rogers
*Honorary Chairman of the Caring Place
from its inception until his death in 2003*

When a child asks us these hard questions, what they are telling us is that they trust us. That trust is a gift to be cherished and honored.

3. Why?

This most difficult-to-answer question is also one of the most common questions we all have. Why did they die? Why did this happen to me? Why?

To connect with, to validate, the anguish behind this question, we might say something like, "That's a good question that I have wondered about myself and that I don't know the answer to. Nobody knows for sure why people die. What we do know is that when someone we love dies, it breaks our heart."

4. Is it my fault?

It is so painful for an adult to hear a child ask this question. It is painful to think of the guilt that this question reflects.

A natural reaction is to quickly remove the question, as if that removes the underlying guilt as well. "No!" we're tempted to say immediately. "Of course not. It's not your fault."

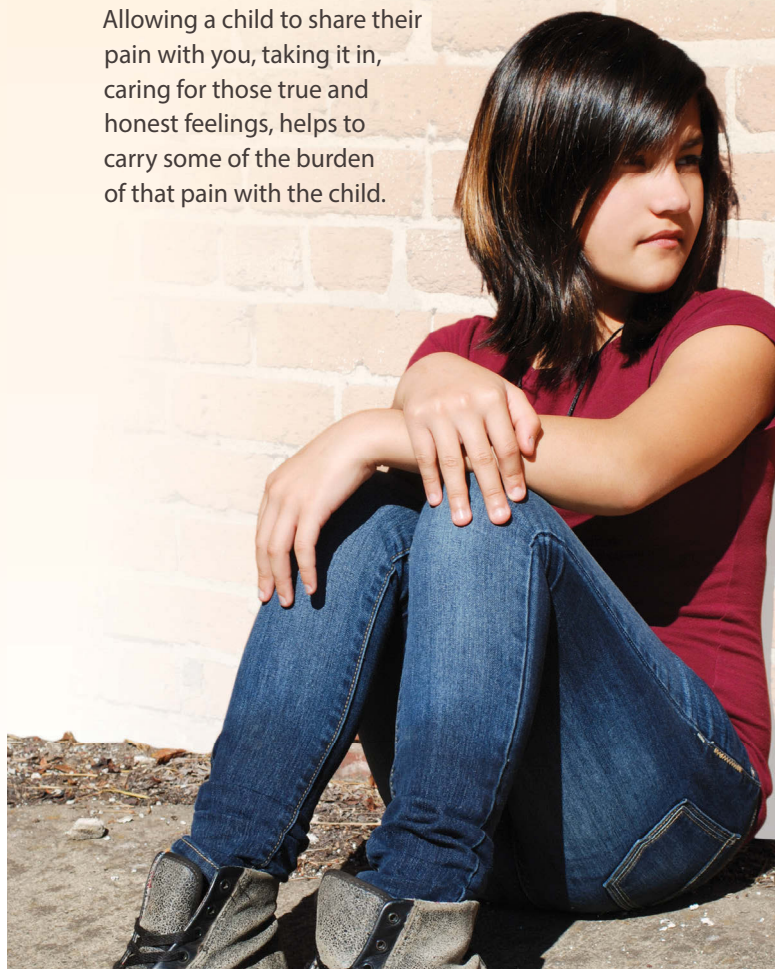
But guilt feelings are very common after a death. The child will likely have heard others tell them that it was not their fault, and they will have likely discounted those statements. The feelings of guilt are real. Instead of shutting them down, it is important to try to help the child open up more and talk about those feelings, and for us to listen with all our heart.

"This is a question," you might say, "that many people ask themselves when someone they love dies." And you might go on, reflecting the child's statements with your own statements like:

- "It feels like it was your fault."
- "You're probably wondering
 - *What if I had (or hadn't)...*
 - *If only I had (or hadn't)...*
- "It sounds like you'd like to do some things differently if you could."

It's hard to see a child in pain. And this question is a reflection of the pain they feel. But telling a child not to feel pain, not to feel guilt, will not make the guilt or the pain go away. In fact, it has a chance of reinforcing thoughts he or she already might have that they'll just have to deal with their pain on their own.

Allowing a child to share their pain with you, taking it in, caring for those true and honest feelings, helps to carry some of the burden of that pain with the child.



5. Is it my responsibility to take care of the family now?

Children receive many messages that it is their responsibility to take care of the family after a parent has died. They hear, from friends, relatives, and the culture at large, variations on “You’re the man or the woman of the house now.”

It is probably true that the child will have to help out more; they may have to do things now that they didn’t have to do before (and talking about the specifics can be helpful).

But the child remains a child. Parents are adults, capable of handling many responsibilities that children (even adolescents) are not yet able to manage. Working out expectations with the child is important so that they are not left with the weight of a responsibility that they don’t have the inner resources to cope with.



Beyond the Questions

We can’t answer these questions for anyone else. But we can create a safe place for the child to ask, and to explore their own answers to, these questions. We can see these questions, not as requests for information, but as the tentative reaching out of a hand in need of support.

The questions are hard. But they are also opportunities we can use to further connect with the child. They are doors that we’ve been invited to enter, and once inside, we can affirm the child through listening to what they have to say, rather than telling them what we want to say. These questions are a chance to validate the child during a very confusing and scary time. Now more than ever, our presence is more important than our knowledge.

Remember, the fact that a child is asking us these or any number of other hard questions is a sign of their trust in us. We have the privilege and the responsibility to respond to the gift of that trust—the gift of that child himself or herself.

We can’t take them out of
the valley of grief.

But we can walk with them
in their valley.

About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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