



Girl Scouts.

Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss

Grief is a normal reaction to change brought about by loss — whether a loved one, a pet, a home, a community or a way of life. Across the nation many of today's children have been exposed to the loss related to natural disasters, such as the recent fires in California, or war or other traumatic events. Whether experiencing these events directly or indirectly, a child's world can be turned upside-down with sense of loss, stress and concerns about safety.

Children feel grief just as intensely as adults, but may not have the cognitive or emotional coping skills that adults have, nor do they always have the words to frame their feelings and reactions.

Some children whose feelings of grief and loss are extremely strong may show no emotion or even exhibit seemingly inappropriate behaviors, such as making jokes or laughing. These children need assistance in dealing with their pain just as much as the children who show their sadness more openly.

Here are some ways you can help children deal with grief:

- Children need to have the opportunity to talk openly about their grief and sadness, as well as their fears. They must be reassured that the emotions they are feeling are valid and normal. Conversations with adults about feelings and concerns should be ongoing.
- Some children may feel guilty about being alive or OK when a loved one is dead or affected by a disaster. Children need to be reassured that they had no role in the events, and that there was nothing that they could have done to prevent them. They need to know that they were not at fault.
- Answer children's questions honestly, simply and in age-appropriate ways. Listen to what the child is really asking.
- Share your own sadness and grief, but remember that children need the stability and strength that adults can provide. Keep in mind that children take cues from non-verbal communication as well as the spoken word.
- Share memorial preparations with children and allow them to participate as much as they care to. The reality of the services and the comfort of the rituals can help them heal. However, children who are afraid to participate in a service or funeral should not be forced to do so.
- Give children outlets to let go of anger and stress. Sports, hobbies, physical play, and the arts are good methods for children to cope.
- Allow children to feel they can have an active role in rebuilding community, whether it is through making family decisions, helping others, or taking action to prevent future loss through emergency preparedness.
- Watch for difficulties such as nightmares, separation anxieties, reversion to babyish behaviors, withdrawal, and intense anger. Set aside some time to help the child explore her feelings and thoughts. If a child's grief and anger persist and interfere with daily activities, professional help may be needed.
- Avoid a constant diet of television programs focusing on the horror, destruction and sadness of events. Choose what a child is exposed to carefully and provide an opportunity to discuss what is seen by the child.

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Resources for Helping Girls Deal with Grief and Loss

Girl Scout Program Materials

Let's Celebrate! Girl Scout Ceremonies (2004) can help girls mark passages or focus on themes for the group. E.g. Hold a Girl Scouts Own to honor survivors, a place that has been changed forever, or a theme such as moving forward.

Girl Scout Daisies

- **The Guide for Daisy Girl Scout Leaders:** The Daisy Circle can be used as a place to discuss concerns; Daisy Petal Activities can focus on feelings and community service.

Girl Scout Brownies

- Healthy Habits Try-It: # 6, Feelings Game
- Manners Try-It: #1, Respect for Others
- Working It Out Try-It: #3, Problem Solving
- The Girl Scout Challenge 1 (online)

Girl Scout Juniors

- Fun and Fit badge
- Healthy Relationships badge
- Stress Less badge
- The Girl Scout Challenge 2 (online)

Girl Scouts 11-17

- Conflict Resolution, Interest Project Award
- Emergency Preparedness, Interest Project Award
- From Stress to Success, Interest Project Award
- Home is Where the Heart Is, Interest Project Award (online)
- Sports for Life, Interest Project Award
- *Express It! STUDIO 2B Focus Book* (2004)
- *Mirror, Mirror: Discover Your Inner Beauty. A Guide for Girls 14-17* (2007).
- The Girl Scout Challenge 3 (online)

Books

- Learning to Get Along Series, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. Various titles, especially *Reach out and Give, When I Feel Afraid, and Understand and Care*. Ages 3-6.
- ***When I Feel Afraid***, by Cheri J. Meiners, Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 2003. Ages 4-8.
- ***What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?*** by Trevor Romain. MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 1999. Ages 5-10.
- ***Good Grief for Kids, A Journal to Help Children Cope with their Grief***, by Katherine Dorn Zotovich. Journalkeepers.com. Ages 9-12.
- ***What to Do When You're Scared and Worried***, by Dr. James J. Crisp, Ph.D. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 2004. Ages 8-15.
- ***When a Friend Dies, A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing***, by Marilyn E. Gootman. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. 2005. Ages 11 and up.

Online

- Pages About Coping with Traumatic Events (National Institute of Mental Health) (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events.shtml>)