



# Childhood Traumatic Grief Educational Materials

From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
Childhood Traumatic Grief Task Force  
Educational Materials Subcommittee

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**National Child Traumatic Stress Network**  
[www.NCTSNet.org](http://www.NCTSNet.org)

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## In-Depth General Information Guide to Childhood Traumatic Grief

### Introduction

This guide presents an overview of childhood traumatic grief, a condition that can affect children's development, relationships, achievement, and later effectiveness in life if not treated or otherwise resolved. We begin by describing normal grief and the grieving process and then define psychological trauma and describe how traumatic experiences can affect children. We explain the differences between normal or uncomplicated grief and childhood traumatic grief. Finally, we present an understanding of what happens when a child experiences the death of another and reacts in ways that interfere with the intense normal course of grieving and present ongoing difficulties. The information will be useful for medical and psychological professionals, parents, caregivers, educators, and others working with children who are experiencing intense grief responses.

The child's perception, rather than the cause of death, plays the key role in determining the development of symptoms following the death of a significant person. Not every child develops traumatic grief after a death that happened in a particularly dramatic or threatening manner. On the other hand, some children may experience what most of us would consider an expected and normal death of another person as a traumatic event.

Because research and information about this special condition is still evolving, we do not yet know which children are most at risk for developing childhood traumatic grief. Signs that a child or adolescent is having difficulty coping with the death may be noticeable in the first few months, or may not be apparent until one or more years later. What we do know is that there are effective treatments for children experiencing childhood traumatic grief and that it is most important to recognize its signs and symptoms.

### What Do We Mean by Grief?

*Grief* describes the intense emotional distress we have following a death. *Bereavement* refers to the state or fact of being bereaved, or having lost a loved one by death. *Mourning* refers to the encompassing family, social, and cultural rituals associated with bereavement. Thus, when you are bereaved, you feel grief, and mourn in special ways.

### What Is the Typical Grieving Process?

There is no right or wrong way to grieve or "appropriate" length of time to experience grief following the death of a loved one. The process can vary from child to child and may change as the child grows older. Issues and questions may arise as children have new experiences and face new challenges that may remind them of an earlier loss. A toddler may have new questions about how his brother died when he reaches school age, a teenage son may miss his father when he learns how to drive, or a daughter may feel a new sense of longing on her wedding day for a mother who died when she was a preteen. With each new developmental challenge,

children are likely to experience their loss in new ways. Throughout their life, children continue to adjust to the loss and develop new ways of coping. Over time, it is helpful if children can relate to their loss in the following ways:

- Accept the reality and permanence of the death.
- Experience and cope with the painful emotional reactions to the death, such as sadness, anger, resentment, confusion, and guilt.
- Adjust to changes in their lives and identity that result from the death.
- Develop new relationships or deepen existing relationships to help them cope with the difficulties and loneliness that may have resulted from the death.
- Maintain a continuing, healthy attachment to the person by reminiscing, remembering, modeling behaviors, and maintaining a memorial.
- Make meaning of the death, a process that can include beginning to understand why the person died and what significance the loss has for the living.
- Continue through the normal developmental stages of childhood and adolescence.

#### **What Is Common Following a Death?**

Any death can be difficult for a child, and certain reactions are common. Children's difficulties with grief vary according to a child's age, developmental level, previous life experiences, emotional health before the death, and family and social environment. An uncomplicated bereavement response may include the following:

- **Emotional reactions:** feeling sad, angry, anxious, numb, lonely, guilty, powerless, ashamed, insecure, and remorseful
- **Changes in behaviors:** lack of interest and participation in usual activities, diminished self-care, unpredictable or odd behaviors, angry or aggressive behaviors, irritability and conflict with others, impulsivity, regression to more childlike or infantile behaviors, changes in sleeping patterns (such as increased sleep), difficulty sleeping or not being able to sleep alone, changes in appetite resulting in weight gain or loss, and changes in overall physical health
- **Interpersonal interactions:** withdrawal, social isolation, peer difficulties, clinging, irritability, difficulty sharing memories, difficulty participating in group or athletic activities, and general lack of interest in others
- **Changes in thinking:** constant thoughts and memories about the loved one, persistent thoughts about the death, disbelief about the death and the finality of death, constant or intrusive thoughts about death, preoccupation with one's own or another loved one's physical health, difficulty making decisions, confusion, impaired memory and concentration, lowered self-esteem and self-confidence, disillusionment, thinking that the death was one's fault, and survivor guilt
- **Altered perceptions:** believing the deceased is still present, feeling the person's presence nearby or watching over the living, seeing the person's face in a crowd, smelling the person's perfume, hearing the person's voice, and experiencing vivid dreams about the person

- *Physical reactions*

