



Heart 'n Home  
— HOSPICE —

**"There are things that we don't want to happen but have to accept, things we don't want to know but have to learn, and people we can't live without but have to let go."**

**~ Unknown**



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## **Coping with Illness and Death Children Ages 9 to 12**

Children have been referred to as the “silent grievers.” As adults we tend to want to protect them from the pain of loss. However, that is not always possible. When a loss occurs in a child’s life, the experience can be seen as an opportunity to teach children effective coping skills and the reality is that they will experience more losses throughout their lives. Knowing how to support children through grief can be difficult, especially if you are also grieving. The following is information that can help you support the grieving children in your life.

Children ages 9 to 12 years old may have feelings of sadness and loss during terminal illness and after a loved one’s death. They may even feel embarrassed about their outbursts of strong emotions. Children at this age are able to understand serious illness and the finality of death, as long as they are given clear information all along. This doesn't mean that the child won't still have a fantasy sometimes about Mom or Dad coming back from death, but with gentle reminders they usually can accept the reality. The child will need detailed, concrete, and complete information about the loved one's illness and its treatment to understand what's going on. Understanding doesn't come in one brilliant flash, but slowly over time, when the truth has a chance to sink in and the child can more easily tolerate the loss.

Possible approaching for working with children ages 9 to 12:

- ♥ Give fairly detailed information about the terminal diagnosis: name of the disease, specifics, symptoms, and as much as possible about what to expect.
- ♥ Explain what the child sees. Answer questions honestly.
- ♥ Assure child the illness (or death) is not their fault.
- ♥ Tell the child that the uncertainty is stressful for everyone, with reminders that the family is strong and will get through this painful time together.
- ♥ Have the child visit the loved one in the hospital. Explain the terminal condition and treatment Suggest topics to discuss. It is helpful if children this age can meet medical staff (i.e. nurses, doctors, etc.) and explore the hospital. Prepare the child for any differences in how the loved one may look before you go.
- ♥ Help the child stay involved in after-school activities, sports, and keep him or her in contact with friends. Remind the child that it's okay to have fun.
- ♥ Inform the child's teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family situation.
- ♥ Explain that it's good if the child is interested in helping with the loved one’s care, but keep in mind that the child cannot be in charge of the care.

## Ages 9 to 12 Continued

- ♥ Encourage the child's interest in reading or writing about cancer or its treatment and their personal response to the loved one's illness.
- ♥ Arrange for one family member or trusted friend to take a special interest in each child.

It is better for the child if he or she is prepared for the loved one's death. Afterward, the child may cry, scream, laugh, or want to be alone for a time - any of a range of emotions is possible. Or, they might want to avoid any strong emotions, but will express their feelings in other ways such as by being messy or stubborn or arguing a lot. Children this age may want to take active parts in the funeral or put special items in the casket.



After the loved one's death, the child may have trouble sleeping.

Some find it comforting to have clothing or other items that had belonged to the loved one, especially during the first year or so. Most like looking at pictures of their loved one during happier times and hearing stories about them. Routines are important, so try and get back to them quickly. Help the child get back to school and their usual activities at least by the time all the ceremonies are over.

**"I believe that  
laughter is the only  
cure for grief. And I  
believe that love is  
stronger than death."  
- Robert Fulghum**

## Normal Grief Reactions

- ♥ Difficulty realizing that death is FINAL.
- ♥ Curiosity about physical/biological aspects of death.
- ♥ Often feel responsibility and guilt.
- ♥ Tend to emotionally distance themselves.
- ♥ Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping and eating disorders, hypochondria).
- ♥ Wide mood swings.
- ♥ Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- ♥ Increase in risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors.
- ♥ Anger; aggression; fighting; oppositional behavior.
- ♥ Withdrawal from adults.
- ♥ Depression; sadness.
- ♥ Lack of concentration and attention.
- ♥ Identity confusion; testing limits .

It is important to remember that just like adults, children do not know how to work through all the intense feels that come with grief. They are trying to figure their grief out. Know what is normal to expect from grieving children is important. It is also important to remember that when behaviors become destructive children need the adults in their lives to hold them accountable and protect them.

Do not be afraid to set limits and give consequences when necessary. This sends a message that they are important and are cared for.

(Excerpt from *Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing with a parent's Terminal Illness*, American Cancer Society. To obtain the full document contact your Heart 'n Home Social Worker.)