

# Helping Your Child Cope with a Loss

## Objective

To help your child cope with the death of a loved one.

## What to Know

After a loss, children need support, stability, and honesty. They may also need reassurance that they will be cared for and kept safe. You can support your child by demonstrating it is okay to express a range of emotions

You can best help your child by encouraging healthy coping skills to use during the grieving process. Here are a few ideas:

**Honestly answer questions.** Children sometimes misunderstand death, so it is important to be literal without sharing information in a blunt or inconsiderate way. Use simple, developmentally appropriate, honest, and concrete terms when explaining death.

**Encourage questions.** Frequently check in with your child and encourage them to ask questions as they arise.

**Encourage and validate the expression of feelings.** Criticism can make your child feel like they are experiencing their grief in a wrong or inappropriate manner. If your child expresses anger or frustration, support and acknowledge their feelings. Tell them their feelings are completely okay and valid. Create an atmosphere where all feelings are normal.

**Emphasize stability.** Offer structure, security, a sense of stability, and safety. Try to maintain routines, limits, and expectations. Let your child know you are going to care for them.

**Encourage normal activities.** Children may take a break from grief to spend time playing. Suggest drawing, reading, listening to music, dancing, and playing.

**Prepare your child if you are away from home.** If you must leave, let them know when you will return. Tell them how you can be reached (e.g., phone, text, video chat, etc.). Identify another adult who will be in contact with you if needed.

**Offer choices.** This increases your child's sense of control.

**Clearly communicate.** Open communication allows your child to express distressing feelings. Discuss changes in the family and work together to problem-solve. Meet regularly as a family to find out how everyone is coping.

**Be patient and understanding.** If your child acts out, avoid being judgmental or punishing. Try to understand what is causing the behavior and communicate with the other adults in your child's life.

**Pay attention to play.** Your child's reactions might be recreated while playing, doing arts and crafts, storytelling, and so on. Even if it is troubling, support your child in expressing their grief.

Show interest in the content. Contact a counselor or other mental health professional if you are concerned.

**Lead by example.** Be expressive and grieve alongside your child. You can show your child healthy ways of coping with grief.

**Involve your child in bereavement activities.** What works for one child might not work for another. Offer unique options, depending on age and developmental phase. Some ideas:

- allow your child to attend family and religious rituals or services if they want to
- if your child is frightened about attending services or rituals, plan to honor or remember the deceased person in some way, such as lighting a candle, making a scrapbook, reviewing photographs, or telling a story
- discuss your spiritual values about life and death
- pray together
- use pictures, clothing, and mementos to remember and talk about the deceased
- find ways to include the memory and presence of the deceased in milestone rituals (weddings, graduations, and so on)
- create new memories while honoring old ones

Use the following tips with your child's school and other social groups.

- Your child may not know how to talk about what happened, so help them come up with phrases they are comfortable with. Give permission for them to say, "I don't want to talk about it right now." Rehearse what they will say.
- Meet with school staff to plan how to best support your child.
- Ask school staff to notify you if any issues arise.

There are some things you might want to avoid, including:

- forcing your child to publicly mourn if they are uncomfortable doing so.
- giving false or confusing messages.
- telling your child to stop crying because others might get upset.
- trying to shield your child from the loss.
- acting tough and avoiding your pain, because this can make your child believe they need to do the same.
- turning your child into your personal confidante. Instead, seek support from another adult, a grief counselor, or a support group.

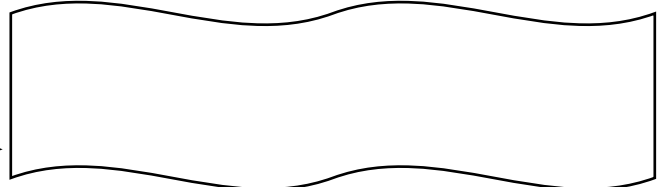
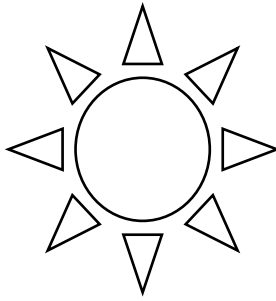
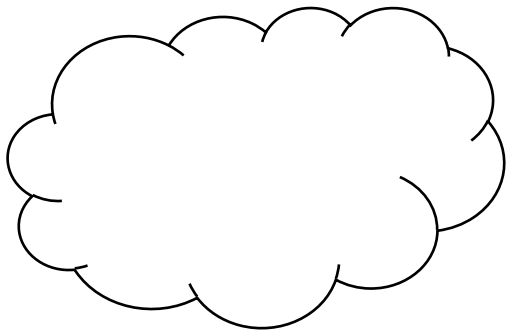
For additional information about how to help your child cope, explore The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families: <https://www.dougy.org/>

## What to Do

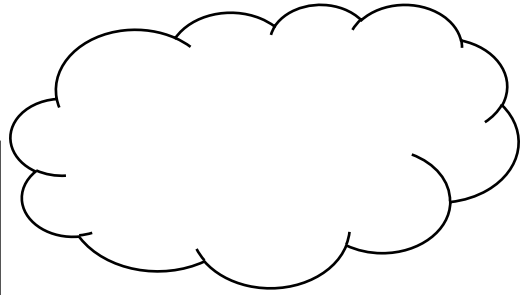
Do this activity as a family. Make a copy of the next page for each family member to fill out. For each part of the house, fill in your answers. Color or decorate the page in any way you wish.

1. **Sun** – write the name of your deceased loved one in the center of the sun.
2. **Banner** – write down ways you can celebrate the life of your loved one.
2. **Cloud #1** – write down how you're feeling right now.
3. **Cloud #2** – write down what you want to remember about your deceased loved one.
4. **Tree** – things you can do to stay healthy while you grieve.
5. **Chimney Smoke** – next to and inside the smoke, write down the names of people or things you've lost.
6. **Inside the House** – write down ways you can stay connected to your family and friends.

When each family member is finished filling in the worksheet, share the completed worksheets with each other.



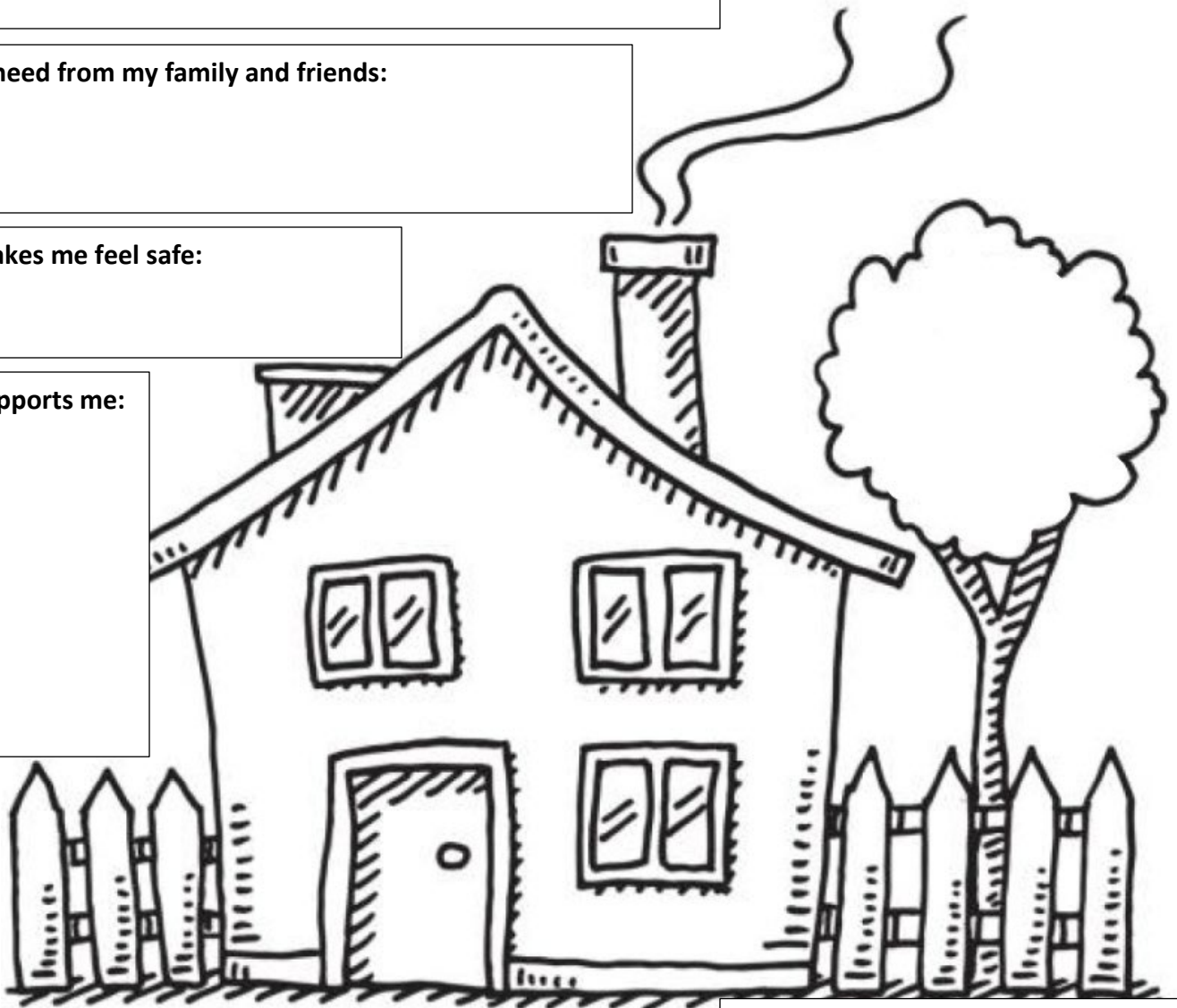
**Healthy ways I can express my grief and work through my thoughts and feelings:**



**Things I need from my family and friends:**

**What makes me feel safe:**

**What supports me:**



**Things I'm scared to talk about or keep hidden from others:**

**My grief is unique because:**