VERMONT Consultation & Psychiatry Access PROGRAM

Supporting Pediatric and Perinatal Providers

CAREGIVERS GUIDE

WHEN YOUR CHILD IS GRIEVING

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Grief is a normal part of life, but supporting a grieving child can be difficult, especially when you are grieving too. Children experience and express grief in many different ways. Having supportive caregivers who make space for their feelings, maintain connection, and provide stability can help children cope with loss and build resilience over time.

Every child, family, and loss is different. Adapt these suggestions to fit your child's age, developmental needs, circumstances, and your family's values.

GROUND YOURSELF FIRST

- If you are grieving the same loss, **make sure you have support too**. Caring for your own needs can help you be more available to your child.
- It is okay for children to see that adults have feelings and experience grief. You do not need to hide your sadness or have everything figured out.

USE CLEAR, AGE-APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

- **Explain what happened simply and directly**. It can be tempting to soften difficult news with phrases or metaphors, but these can sometimes be confusing, particularly for younger children. For example, you might say: *"They died. That means their heart stopped beating and their body stopped working. We will miss them very much. We can still talk about them, look at pictures, and remember them together."*
- Give your child information that is appropriate for their age and developmental level, and be prepared to explain things more than once.

MAKE SPACE FOR ALL FEELINGS

- Let your child know that **there is no "right" way to grieve**. Sadness, anger, guilt, worry, confusion, and even moments of happiness or seeming unaffected can all be part of grief.
- Encourage expression through talking, writing, art, music, movement, or play.
- **Listen without immediately trying to fix their feelings or make them feel better.** Sometimes being present is the most helpful thing you can do.

WELCOME QUESTIONS

- Invite your child to ask questions about what happened and about grief. You might simply say, **"What questions do you have?"**
- It is okay if you do not know the answer. Being honest and present is more important than having a perfect response.
- Children may ask the same questions repeatedly as they gradually understand and process what happened.

REMEMBER THAT GRIEF IS NOT LINEAR

- Grief often **comes and goes in waves**. A child may seem fine one moment and deeply upset the next.
- Feelings may reappear around birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, developmental milestones, or other reminders of the loss.
- Younger children often communicate through their behavior. Temporary changes in behavior, sleep, mood, or routines may be part of how they express distress.

MAINTAIN CONNECTION TO THE PERSON WHO DIED OR IS GONE

- Let your child know that it **is okay to remember and talk about the person**.
- Share stories, look at photographs, celebrate traditions, or find other meaningful ways to maintain memories and connection.
- Follow your child's lead about how and when they want to remember the person.

FOSTER CONNECTION

- Make time for **one-on-one connection and regular family activities**, such as meals, games, walks, or other things you enjoy together.
- Offer affection, reassurance, and loving words in ways that feel comfortable to your child.
- Encourage connection with friends, extended family, school, community, and activities that help your child feel supported and capable.

MAINTAIN ROUTINES AND HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

- Loss can make life feel unpredictable. **Familiar routines and consistent expectations can help children feel safe and secure.**
- Offer additional patience and comfort while continuing to provide appropriate structure and boundaries.
- Help your child focus on the parts of daily life they can control and the routines they can count on.

REACH OUT FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT WHEN NEEDED

- Lean on your existing support network, including extended family, friends, community organizations, schools, and spiritual or religious communities when appropriate.
- Support groups can help children and families connect with others who have experienced similar losses.
- Some families may benefit from individual, caregiver, or family therapy. **Not every grieving child needs individual therapy**. Strong support from caregivers and other trusted adults can be very powerful.

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