



Who else will die?  
Are they coming  
back? Do they  
remember me?  
Why did they  
leave me?  
Were they  
mad at me?  
Who am  
I now?

# *Responding to Children in Grief and the Questions They Ask*

HIGHMARK.  
**CARING PLACE**

A Center for Grieving Children,  
Adolescents and Their Families



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## Connecting with a Grieving Child

Truly connecting with a child is always important, but it is especially so when the child is grieving.

When a grieving child asks a question, ultimately the conversation that results—the connection made with the child—is more important than the answer.

We need to remember that the child has had a loved one die, that their life has changed dramatically. At the Caring Place, we see grieving children who typically feel broken-hearted, afraid, alone and devastated.

What the child wants most—to have the person alive and with them again—can not be. To truly support a child in grief, it's important to allow a child to be “not OK” without trying to “fix” them.

We can't make everything OK for the child, but we can support them, we can hear them, we can love them. Responses to questions posed by a child in grief should deepen our connection with that child. The aim is to create a situation in which the child feels safe enough to ask further questions, now and in the future, and to have the child know that we are there for them to talk to.

## Listening to a Grieving Child

All children need to feel listened to and heard. Being listened to—and feeling listened to—is one of the most important ways that we all feel cared for and valued.

A child experiencing the overwhelming feelings of grief especially needs to know that they are being listened to and heard.

It is important to listen with our hearts as well as our heads, in a non-judgmental, accepting way.

### We need to

- Listen to the child's question.
- Listen to the feelings behind the child's question.
- Listen to the child.

The grieving child asking these hard questions needs our full attention. We need to stop whatever else it is we're doing, and be fully present, not allowing ourselves to be distracted by other things.

Truly listening means paying attention, without preparing our answers while the child is speaking, as well as being open to their feelings, their pain, their sorrow.

The goal of this listening is to have the child feel heard and understood and validated.

*“In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers.”*

—Fred Rogers

*Honorary Chairman of the Caring Place  
from its inception until his death in 2003.*

## Validating a Grieving Child

When someone dies, a child often feels many things all at once. This can be confusing and overwhelming. Most of all, it is scary. In addition, often the feelings are new to them and this makes them even more frightened.

The child asking these questions needs to have her feelings validated—the child herself needs to be validated.

### To validate and support the child, we can say to them:

- “What you are thinking (or feeling) is normal!”
- “You are OK.”
- “It's natural (or normal) to feel that way.”

### What we don't want is to minimize their feelings by saying things like:

- “You shouldn't feel like that.”
- “Don't worry.”
- “That's silly.”

**It's very common not to know what to say in answer to some of these questions. What we could say when we don't know what to say:**

- “I don't know. I've often wondered about that myself. (Let's talk about it).”
- “Tell me more about how you are feeling (or what you are thinking).”
- We can also repeat back to the child what they said, in our own words.

*— Trust —*

*When a child asks us these hard questions, what they are telling us is that they trust us. That trust is a gift to be cherished and honored.*



This brochure is one of a four-part series on questions grieving children ask.

## About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the mission of the Highmark Caring Place to:

- Raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- Provide programs to address those needs
- Equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one

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