

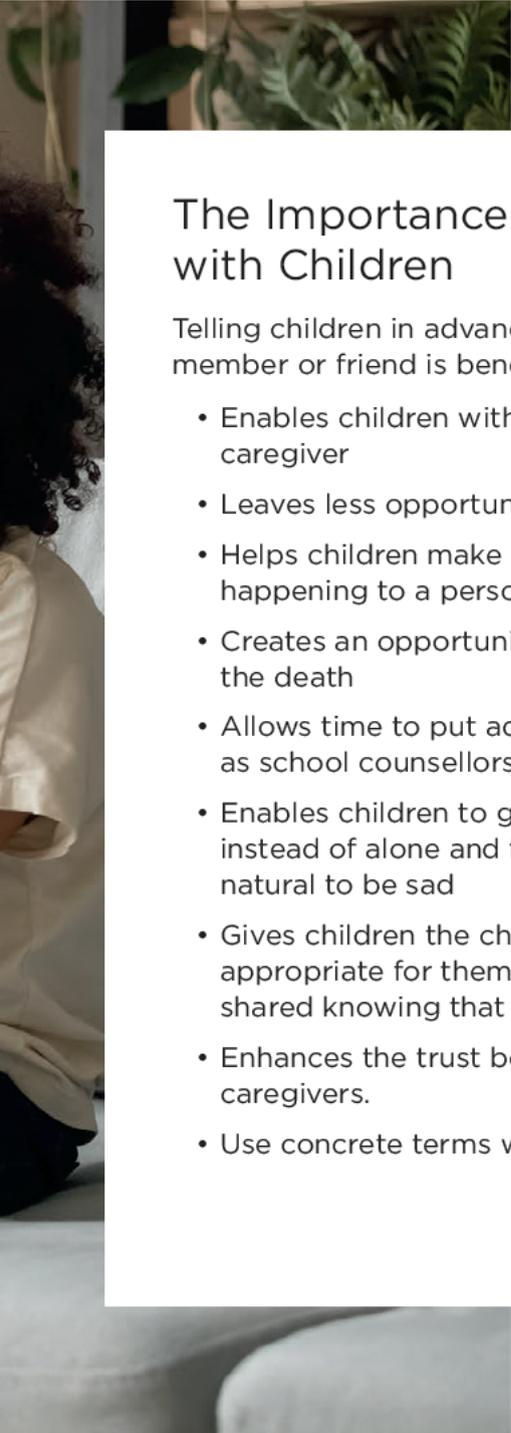


# What to Say & How to Say It

A Grief and Bereavement Guide for Parents

# Talk to Your Children





## The Importance of Talking Honestly with Children

Telling children in advance about the potential death of a family member or friend is beneficial because it...

- Enables children with honest information straight from their caregiver
- Leaves less opportunity for misconceptions
- Helps children make sense of the physical changes they see happening to a person who is unwell
- Creates an opportunity to play a role in preparing for the death
- Allows time to put additional support systems in place, such as school counsellors and grief programs, etc.
- Enables children to grieve with the adults in their lives, instead of alone and from the sidelines. Show them it's natural to be sad
- Gives children the chance to say goodbye in a way that feels appropriate for them or to just be with the person with a shared knowing that their time together is limited
- Enhances the trust between children and their primary caregivers.
- Use concrete terms when talking about death.

## When do I tell the children?

Strategies to help you decide on timing to tell children about a death.

- Talk to children as soon as possible.
- Ask children to describe what they already know about the situation.
- Reassure children that talking about death does not increase the chances of the death occurring.
- Ask children how much information they want. Do they want a lot of information or just a summary of the most important information?
- Create an environment where children feel safe asking questions.
- Discuss the changes they are seeing, hearing, and experiencing.
- Recognize that it's unnecessary to hold off telling children until "all of the medical information" is obtained. Many families think they shouldn't talk to children until they have more information (more test results, a more accurate prognosis). But children can appreciate being a part of the experience of uncertainty with the adults in their life. You never know how long you have.
- Ask the physician directly for an estimation as to how long the person will live. If the death may be imminent, it's important to share that information with children right away.
- Check in with you child after you talk and expect them to process the information in stages.

## How to talk to children

These are prompts to help get conversations started.

*When you die...*

- Your heart stops.
- Your body stops working.
- You don't eat.
- You don't breathe — to give more concrete information about what is the meaning of death

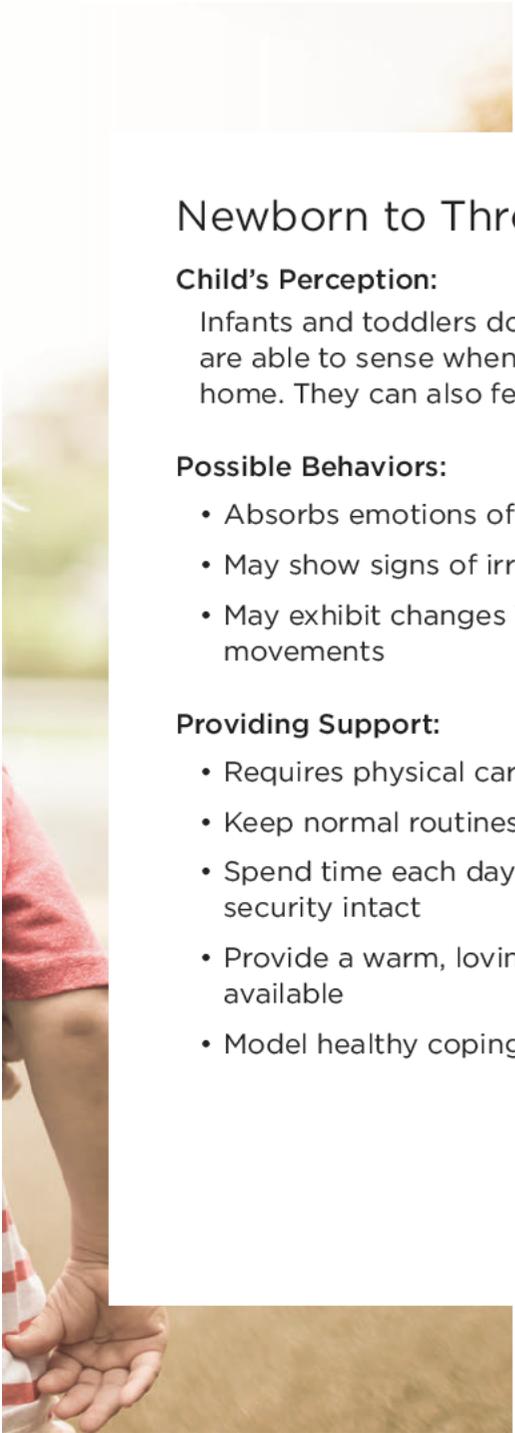


## How to encourage kids to interact with loved one(s) at end of life

- Help with mouth care, such as swabbing the mouth or applying moisturizer to the lips (depending on the age of the child).
- Paint finger nails and toenails.
- Decorate the room.
- Choose music.
- Apply moisturizer.
- Hold hands.
- Take pictures.
- Tell stories of favorite memories or what happened in the child's day.
- Do homework or other quiet activities such as coloring or playing video games, or watching a movie, at the bedside.

# Guidelines for Helping Children Cope with Death by Age





## Newborn to Three Years

### **Child's Perception:**

Infants and toddlers don't have an understanding of death but are able to sense when there is sadness, and anxiety in the home. They can also feel when a significant person is missing.

### **Possible Behaviors:**

- Absorbs emotions of others around him/her
- May show signs of irritability; cranky, crying or clinging
- May exhibit changes in eating and in bowel and bladder movements

### **Providing Support:**

- Requires physical care, affection, reassurance
- Keep normal routines when possible
- Spend time each day with your child to keep the feeling of security intact
- Provide a warm, loving caretaker when a parent is not available
- Model healthy coping behaviors



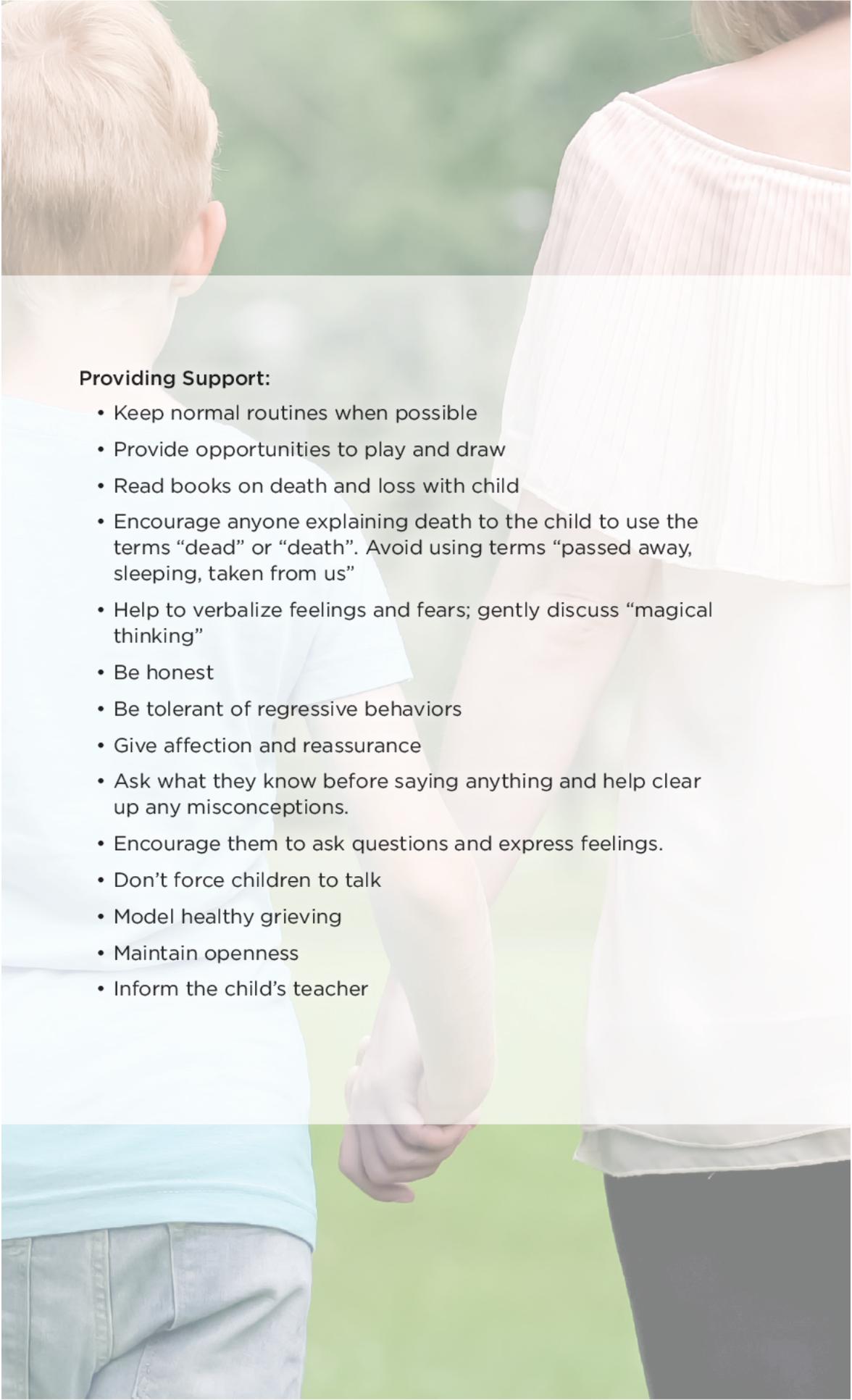
## Three to Six Years

### **Child's Perception:**

Children think death is reversible; temporary, like going to sleep, or when a parent goes to work; believes that people who die will come back. May believe their thoughts, actions or words have caused the death or that the death is punishment for bad behavior.

### **Possible Behaviors:**

- Greatly impacted by parent's emotional state
- Has difficulty handling spiritual concepts
- May experience regressive behaviors, bed wetting, thumb sucking, security blanket, etc.
- Difficulty talking about how they feel, therefore may act out of feelings
- Increased aggression- more irritable
- Will ask the same questions repeatedly in efforts to begin making sense of situation
- Only capable of showing sadness for short periods of time, will escape in play

A young boy with blonde hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and grey pants, is seen from the back, holding the hand of a woman. The woman is wearing a white, ribbed, off-the-shoulder top. They are standing outdoors on a grassy area with a blurred green background. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the image, containing text.

### Providing Support:

- Keep normal routines when possible
- Provide opportunities to play and draw
- Read books on death and loss with child
- Encourage anyone explaining death to the child to use the terms “dead” or “death”. Avoid using terms “passed away, sleeping, taken from us”
- Help to verbalize feelings and fears; gently discuss “magical thinking”
- Be honest
- Be tolerant of regressive behaviors
- Give affection and reassurance
- Ask what they know before saying anything and help clear up any misconceptions.
- Encourage them to ask questions and express feelings.
- Don’t force children to talk
- Model healthy grieving
- Maintain openness
- Inform the child’s teacher

## Six to Nine Years

Child begins to somewhat understand death. Can differentiate between living and non-living.

### **Possible Behaviors:**

- Fear that death is contagious and other loved ones will “catch it” and die
- Asks more detailed questions and very curious about the body
- Guilt-may blame them for death
- Separation anxiety and also may become withdrawn
- Continues to have difficulty expressing feelings, which may cause aggression
- Afraid to go to school or be away from home
- Continues to have difficulty to spirituality

### **Providing support:**

- Ask what they know before saying anything and help clear up any misconceptions
- Talk and ask questions with child and encourage them to express feelings
- Don't force children to talk
- Make sure child does not feel responsible in any way
- Identify specific fears; share bad dreams
- Provide opportunity for play, drawing, and art
- Be honest
- Help them with positive memories of deceased
- Model healthy coping behaviors
- Avoid saying things like “don't worry, things will be okay,” and “you are such a strong boy/girl”
- Use honest words. Avoid “Your parent went to sleep and is now in heaven.” They are not able to understand what that means yet
- Maintain openness
- Inform the child's teacher



## Nine to Thirteen Years

Child understanding is nearer to adult understanding of death. More aware of finality of death and impact the death has on them.

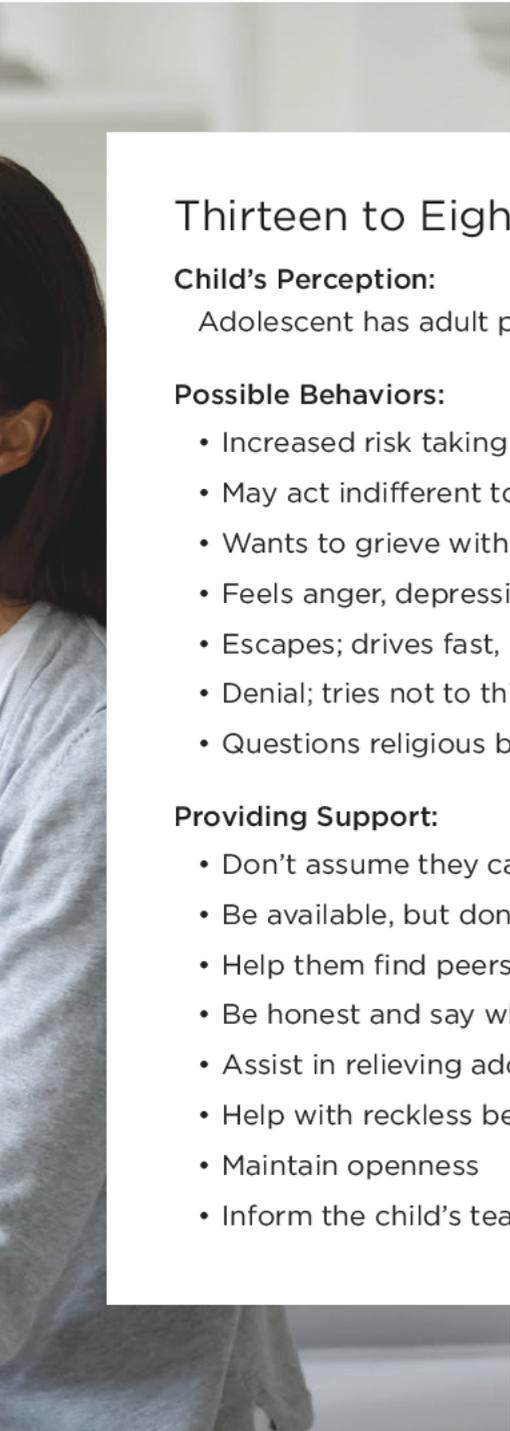
### **Possible Behaviors:**

- Concerned with how their world will change with the loss of the relationship, “am I still a big sister/brother”
- Fewer questions and a fragile independence
- May at first seem as if nothing has happened
- Beginning to develop an interest in spirituality
- Disrupted relationships with peers; uncomfortable being at school
- Increased anger, guilt
- Self-conscious about their fears

### **Providing support:**

- Encourage discussion, writing or drawing of their feelings
- Allow for regressive behaviors
- Be honest and tell a child when you do not have the answer
- Relieve child from attempts to take over adult responsibility
- Model healthy coping behaviors
- Don't force children to talk
- Ask what they know before saying anything and help clear up any misconceptions
- Talk, ask questions, and encourage your child to express feelings
- Maintain openness
- Inform the child's teacher





## Thirteen to Eighteen Years

### **Child's Perception:**

Adolescent has adult perception of death.

### **Possible Behaviors:**

- Increased risk taking in effort to reduce anxiety
- May act indifferent to death as a protection against fear
- Wants to grieve with his/her peers, not adults
- Feels anger, depression; may need permission to grieve
- Escapes; drives fast, uses drugs or alcohol, sexually acts out
- Denial; tries not to think about it, doesn't want to talk about it
- Questions religious beliefs

### **Providing Support:**

- Don't assume they can handle everything without support
- Be available, but don't push; give permission for regression
- Help them find peers who will support their feelings
- Be honest and say when you do not have an answer
- Assist in relieving adolescent burden of adult responsibility
- Help with reckless behavior
- Maintain openness
- Inform the child's teacher

# Visitation and Funeral

## **Preparation for Burial:**

Allow children to participate in preparation dependent on age. Pick out flowers, songs, pictures, etc.

## **Children and the funeral:**

Parents often want to protect their children from any contact with death. However, a memorial service can be an important event for children as it is an opportunity to say good-bye. Dependent on age, encourage your child to attend, but respect their wishes if they choose not to go.

## **Children Viewing the Body:**

Dependent on age, children should be given a choice to view or touch the body. Seeing the body may help them to understand the reality of the death. Tell them what to expect when they see or touch the body. Reinforce the permanence of death. That their body is no longer working, their heart is not beating, they are not breathing, they cannot talk, Etc.

## **Cremation:**

When telling your children about cremation you might explain it by saying for example, "Cremation is where heat is used to change the body into ashes." Dependent on age, explain that this doesn't hurt their loved one.

## **Possible Behaviors:**

It is normal for anger to take over. Even if there is no one to blame for the death, a child may try to find someone or something to be angry at and THIS IS NORMAL.

Anger, denial, fear and guilt should be admitted, expressed, and let go of through the grief process.



## Helpful reads

Below is a list of books that may help you talk with your child about death, dying, and grief.

### Age Range 3 - 6 Years

Title: *The Goodbye Book*  
Author: Todd Parr

### Age Range 4 - 8 Years

Title: *Lifetimes – The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*  
Author: Bryan Mellonie

Title: *The Invisible String*  
Author: Patrice Karst

Title: *A Terrible Thing Happened*  
Author: Margaret M. Holmes

Title: *When Dinosaurs Die*  
Author: Laurie Krasny Brown

### Age Range Teens

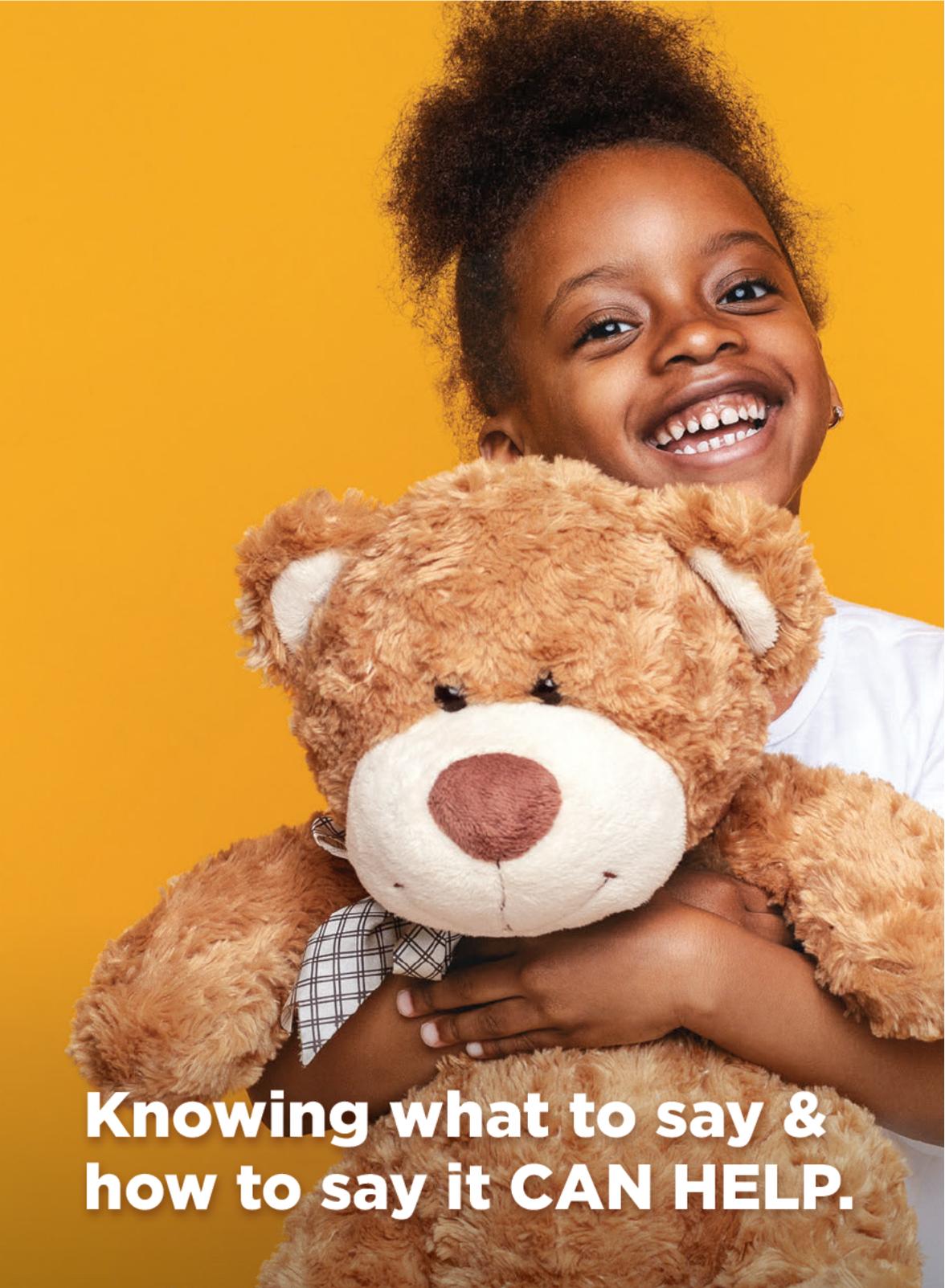
Title: *The Grieving Teen*  
Author: Helen Fitzgerald

Title: *When a Friend Dies*  
Author: Marilyn E. Gootman

### For Adults

Title: *How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness*  
Author: Kathleen McCue and Ron Bonn

Title: *What Do We Tell the Children?*  
Author: Joseph M. Primo



**Knowing what to say &  
how to say it CAN HELP.**

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