



# How To Handle Grief...

## Helping Children Grieve

Planning activities for children and teens allows them to express their feelings and provides an effective outlet for the many emotions they are experiencing. These activities can also bring parents and children together as they each journey through their grief.

Ryan's Heart has compiled some effective healing options for families and children who are grieving. Many of the activities we have listed are supported by grief support clinics and professionals, however they do not replace professional counseling. Should psychological help be needed, we highly encourage individuals to seek out those who are professionally trained to help them.

### How to Handle Grief

As you prepare to help your child or yourself, you may first want to consider the following:

1. Be aware of your own personal feelings. Be sure to express your feelings in both a safe and appropriate manor.
2. Set aside an appropriate length of time to talk with your child. Be sure you are in comfortable surroundings. Do not try to rush through this time.
3. Understand that all children are different and that children grieve differently. Respect their feelings and encourage them to express their emotions, regardless of intensity or how brief.
4. Prepare and set aside time to do physical activities that help your child express their emotions—especially anger. (example: “fly like a lion” or “build a scream box”)
5. Answer only the questions your child asks. Do not overload them with explanations. Be patient. Children often ask repetitive questions as they attempt to understand.
6. Realize that “I don’t know.” IS an appropriate and acceptable answer.
7. Be ready to offer many choices for decision making; and offer them often. Research suggests that death often causes feelings of losing control.
8. Remember that children generalize. They will associate important places and emotions with people, for example they may associate death with a hospital.
9. Keep things constant. Kids depend on the basics. Regular routines become increasingly important in times of grieving. It provides a sense of “normalcy” and is also very comforting in an otherwise turbulent time.
10. Observe your child’s behavior and allow them to grieve as part of the family. Be very careful to NOT exclude them. Exclusion can cause misunderstanding as a child will often draw their own conclusions.
11. Prepare yourself and your child for holidays and special occasions. These occasions are impossible to ignore and will no doubt be very painful. Making memory boxes or cards can help work through these feelings. Seek out professional workshops or other ways to help you process both your child’s and your own grief.



## Family Activities

### Create a Family Flag

Creating a family flag can represent your family's grief journey.

1. Use fabric of choice and cut to desired size.
2. Hem and sew one seam along the edge for the flagpole to slide through.
3. Decorate and embellish as desired. Use small jewels or photos that remind your child of your loved one or your families journey through grief.
4. Proudly display your flag to encourage hope for the future and represent love for the past.

### Create a "Heart-Break" pot

1. Purchase small terra-cotta pots. Use one large pot for a family project or several small pots for each individual family member.
2. Carefully break (do not shatter) the pot(s).
3. Using paint pens and markers, have each family member or child write on the inside of the broken pieces. Instruct them to identify their feelings about being alone in their grief. On the outside of the pieces write about or draw their sources of support.
4. Work together to glue and piece the pot back together. This process incorporates the analogy that when a significant death occurs, ones heart breaks.

### Create a Mirror-Mask

1. Purchase mid-size hand mirrors with handles.
2. Provide markers, glue, yarn and a few other embellishments.
3. First, have your child identify feelings they share with the world and write those on the mirrored side of the mirror.
4. Then have your child identify feelings they tend to keep hidden from the world and write those on the other side of the mirror.
5. Discuss with your child how children and adults often are afraid to show how they feel because they are afraid of what the world might think of them or that they will be judged.
6. Explain that because of this people often protect themselves by only sharing certain parts of their personality or feelings. This is often referred to as "wearing masks".
7. Help your child identify who they can share their feelings with, including the ones they identify on the underside of the mirror.

### Play Fruit Ball

Play Fruit Ball—a fun and simple game that allows children to smash fruit and vegetables as they are used in a game of baseball instead of using a baseball or softball.

Using slightly spoiled items works best as they splatter more! Tomatoes, apples, oranges, bell peppers and potatoes all work great. It's a little messy, but kids (and adults) love it.



## Physical Activities

### Make a Scream Box

Equipment: Cereal box, paper towel tube, tape, paper, scissors

1. Stuff a cereal box with crumpled paper
2. Close the cereal box and cut a hole in the top for the paper towel tube.
3. Tape the paper towel tube to the hole in the cereal box.
4. Decorate the box however you want.
5. Scream into the box!!!

### Make a Mad Box

Equipment: Box of any size, tape, paper

1. Fill box with paper. Cut pictures from a magazine or write down things that make you mad.
2. Tape the box shut.
3. Use a plastic bat or jump up and down on the box until it is destroyed.
4. Discard or recycle the remnants.

### Make Worry Beads

Equipment: Sculpting clay, toothpick, old cookie sheet

1. Roll clay into small balls.
2. Use the toothpick to put a hole through the center of the ball, making a bead.
3. Bake according to directions on the package.
4. String the beads after baking.

*Variation: Use molding clay or play-dough to mold and sculpt into different shapes. The feel of the clay can be soothing, helping to release anger, especially when children throw it onto a hard surface.*

### Fly Like a Lion

Equipment: Table, bean bags, gym mats or other soft surface, loud voices and supervision

1. Talk to your child about strength and power. Discuss people and animals who are powerful and what it means to them.
2. Help your child climb onto a table.
3. Let your child jump off the table onto the soft landing. Encourage him to jump powerfully (like a lion) and use a loud powerful voice (or roar).
4. This is a great exercise for children to take back some of the power they may feel that they have lost during an illness or death, as well as a way to reach and express deep feelings.



## It's Not My Fault!!!

Equipment: stack of old newspapers or phone books

1. Sit with your child and talk openly about how people can feel guilty when a loved one dies.
2. Ask your child if they have any of these feelings.
3. Explain that it is normal to feel this way, but that death is not their fault. Have them practice by saying "It's not my fault!" out loud.
4. When they become more comfortable, have them yell, "It's Not My Fault!!!" while tearing up the phone books or newspaper.
5. Cool down by picking up the torn paper (your guilt) and stuffing it into trash bags.

## More activities for helping children express emotion

1. READ! READ! READ! with your child. Discuss what you read and how it relates to your situation.
2. Pillow fights help release pent up anger and other physical emotions.
3. Fill a bag with plastic bottles and let your child kick and or throw the bottles.
4. Run.
5. Throw stones or balls (safely, of course)
6. Draw pictures of what makes your child mad or how they are feeling.
7. Write stories, poems, or letters.
8. Listen to music. SING! Sing with your child and at church or with other social groups.
9. Create a memory scrap-book of your loved one.
10. Send thank you cards to rescue workers or teachers for helping you or maybe for helping others in a time of need.
11. Say prayers for people.
12. Balloon Releases

*These activities are for suggestion only. They are also used and supported by Grief Support Groups like the American Hospice Foundation and Memories are Forever. Grief counseling groups are available in many areas of the country and can also provide more suggestions and outlets that you and child can do together as you work through grief.*

*The most important thing to remember is that your child needs you and you need your child for moral support. Participating in activities together and having quiet discussions will do wonders for your broken hearts. Ryan's Heart sincerely hopes that you find these suggestions useful and supportive as you travel through your own unique journey.*