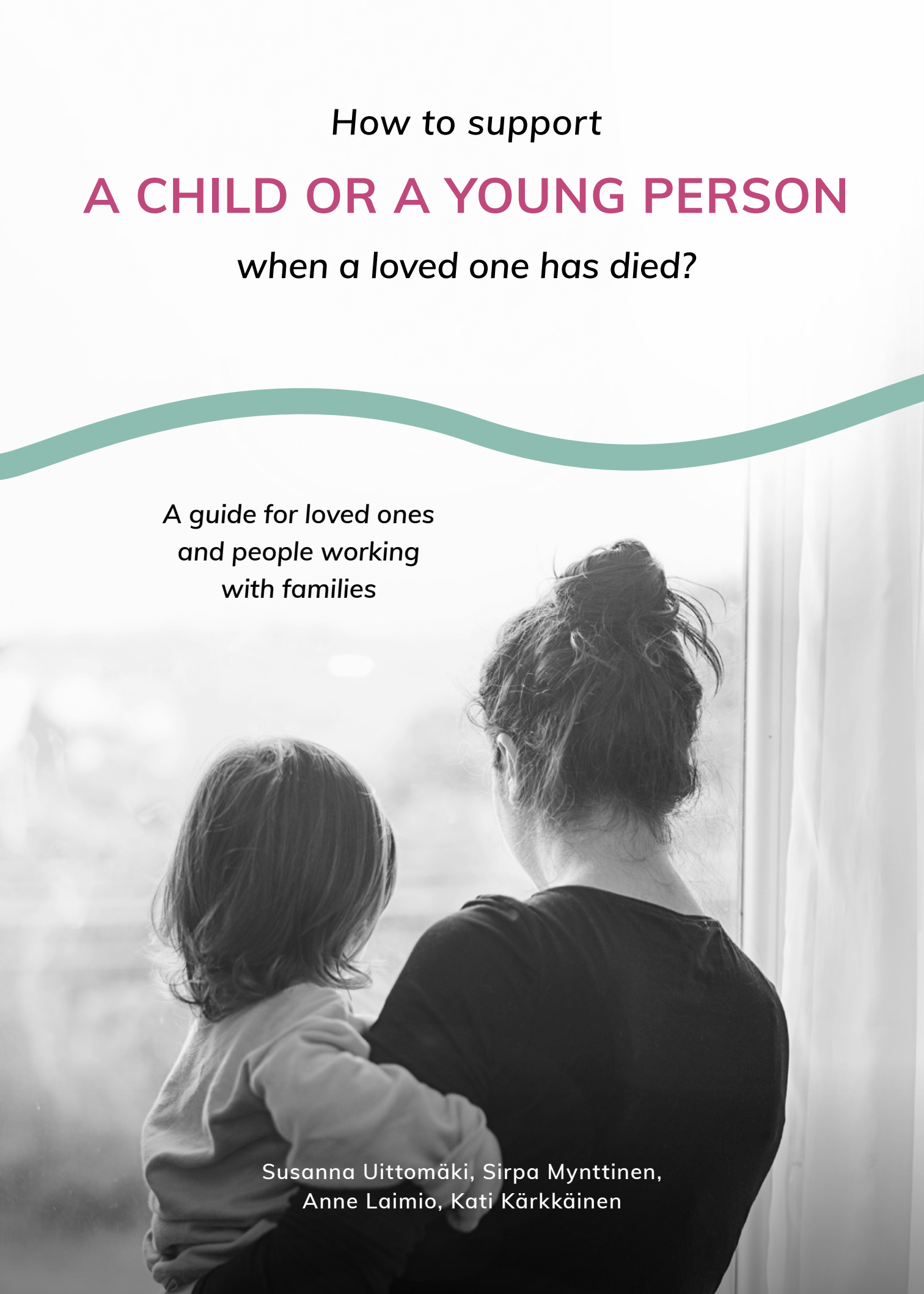


How to support

# A CHILD OR A YOUNG PERSON

when a loved one has died?

A guide for loved ones  
and people working  
with families



Susanna Uittomäki, Sirpa Mynttinen,  
Anne Laimio, Kati Kärkkäinen

# HOW TO SUPPORT A CHILD OR A YOUNG PERSON WHEN A LOVED ONE HAS DIED?

## *A guide for loved ones and people working with families*

© Uittomäki Susanna, Mynttinen Sirpa, Laimio Anne, Kärkkäinen Kati.  
Käpy Lapsikuolemaperheet ry. Updated edition 2022.

Design and layout: Viivi Waris

Illustration: Paulus, aged 13 (p. 9, 11, 20 and 39) and the children and young people in Käpy ry's and Nuoret Lesket ry's peer support groups.

Photographs: cover iStock, p. 26 Auli Kukkonen, others Unsplash

Printed in: Kirjapaino Hermes, Tampere  
ISBN 978-952-68094-6-5 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-952-68094-7-2 (PDF)

**THIS GUIDE** can be ordered as a physical copy or downloaded on the websites of the following non-governmental organisations:  
Käpy Lapsikuolemaperheet ry, [www.kapy.fi](http://www.kapy.fi)  
Nuoret Lesket ry, [www.nuoretlesket.fi](http://www.nuoretlesket.fi)

The writing of the original guide (2011) was supported with a grant by The Päivikki and Sakari Sohlberg Foundation

Grant for the revised edition by:  
The Alli Paasikivi Foundation



ALLI  
PAASIKIVEN  
SÄÄTIÖ



”

**My sister has died.** She died because her heart was too sick. Mum said that she's at peace now and watching me from heaven. But I heard when mum told Marja that she doesn't believe in heaven. They thought I was sleeping, but I heard her say that. Besides, how can a dead person see anything from heaven when there are no windows in the coffin? And how can my sister be in heaven and in the grave at the same time? Kaisa had a teddy bear just like mine at kindergarten. Samu had forgotten his toy at home. We played together with those bears. I'm a little scared to go to sleep because the auntie at kindergarten said that my sister slept away. What if I fall asleep like that too accidentally, or mum or dad? We sang a duck song at kindergarten. I said that my sister is dead, even though the duck had sisters and brothers. None of my friends' sisters haven't died. Was I nice enough to my sister? I don't want to ask the auntie at kindergarten because I don't think she wants to talk about death. I can't ask mum or dad, because I always feel like crying, and they just get sadder. I have to be nice to dad and mum so that they won't too. Mum told Marja that her heart hurt when my sister died. We're going to visit Aunt Marja. She has three cats, Jalmari, Miuku and Raita. If I don't talk about the death, it probably won't happen again. Luckily I can be strong and happy and think about nicer things. That way I can sort of forget about it.



# CONTENT

<b>Foreword .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Signs of grief in children and young people .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2. Factors that affect how we experience grief .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Whom did the child or young person lose? .....	12
Learning about what happened .....	14
The significance of attachment styles .....	14
Previous experiences .....	15
Family and environment .....	15
The nature of the death .....	16
<b>3. Myths and clichés about grief .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4. How children and young people think about death .....</b>	<b>23</b>
Younger than 2 years old .....	23
Ages 2 to 5 .....	23
Ages 6 to 9 .....	24
Ages 10 to 13 .....	25
Ages 14 to 18 .....	25
<b>5. How loved ones can support a grieving child or young person .....</b>	<b>27</b>
Give truthful information and have honest discussions .....	27
Give time and space to process the grief .....	29
Promote a sense of security with everyday routines .....	29
Encourage expression and processing of emotions .....	30
Help the child remember and make the loss real .....	31
Keep an eye on the child's/young person's wellbeing .....	32
Take care of your own wellbeing .....	32
<b>6. The role of professionals working with children and young people .....</b>	<b>33</b>
Meeting the family .....	33
Returning to school or kindergarten .....	34
How loss affects behaviour .....	36
Continued support .....	37
<b>7. Peer support .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>8. When to seek professional help .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>9. Help from non-governmental organisations and parishes .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Practical tips .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Bibliography on children's and young people's grief .....</b>	<b>48</b>



## FOREWORD

“Grief will touch anyone,” Liisa Pajunen begins her song *Kyynel* (‘Tear’) with these words on her *Sinua en unohda* (‘I Won’t Forget You’) album. Grief touches children and young people as well, even though we as adults would like to protect them from adversities and evil. This guide is intended for support for when a child’s or young person’s loved one has passed away.

People often think that a child whose loved one has died has “forgotten” or “is not grieving” unless we as adults see clear signs of grief in the child. A child travels through grief and play, and sometimes it’s difficult for an adult to notice when a child is troubled by their loss. We wanted to highlight these thoughts with the story at the beginning of this guide, which could be told by a child. Even with young adults, it can be difficult to tell from observations alone what the death of a loved one means to them and how they feel it in their everyday life. However, open communication will help you understand their experience.

”

***It’s enough that  
you’re present and  
ready to be by the  
person’s side.***

You don't have to be a "grief professional" to support a bereaved person – it's enough that you're present and ready to be by the person's side. Each child and young person who has lost a loved one should be entitled to support. This support should also be actively offered to families. We hope that this guide encourages loved ones and people working with children and young people to meet the bereaved person bravely and direct them to available support. In this guide, we will give you practical tips on how support a grieving child and young person and help them process their grief.

A moderate amount of Finnish-language literature has been published on children's grief and supporting a bereaved child in the past twenty years. We writers have worked with children and young people whose loved ones have passed away and want to share our experience-based perspective on meeting families and the importance of peer support. In addition to our own experiential information, this guide contains theoretical information from multiple sources. A thorough list of these sources is included in the bibliography.

Unaddressed grief can be dammed up for years and arise even stronger in later life events, such as new losses. For this reason, it's important that you can start processing the loss as soon as it has happened. Grief won't go away – you will just learn to live with it. Life goes on in these altered circumstances. Even a major loss does not mean that the child or young person can't have a bright future ahead of them.

If you are a loved one of a grieving child or adolescent, you can give this guide to the school or kindergarten staff to read. If you yourself are working with children or



***People of different ages experience grief similarly in many ways. For example, the extent of people's emotional spectrums and emotional nuances differ tend to be similar. Moreover, the holisticness of reactions is similar across age groups – your body grieves just like your mind does. What is special about children and young people is that they need adult care and support to process the loss, because they are still developing. It is the responsibility of their nearest adult(s) to make them time for grieving and ensure that everyday life goes on.***

young people and meet a family that has lost a loved one, we hope that you give them this guide.

Because there are many similarities in children's and young people's grief experience, we will sometimes use the general term "child" to describe minor adolescents. When we are talking about small children, we will mention this separately. We will sometimes emphasise adolescence with the term "young person" or "young adult". The different chapters of this guide will contain some repetition, which will help you take in the information if you only want to read certain chapters.

We would like to thank the Päivikki and Sakari Sohlberg Foundation for the grant that made it possible for us to write this guide. We would also like to thank the Alli Paasikivi Foundation for the grant that was used to update this guide. This updated edition has more content on young people's grief.

In Tampere, autumn 2021

*Susanna Uttomäki, Sirpa Mynttinen, Anne Laimio and Kati Kärkkäinen*



# 1. SIGNS OF GRIEF IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

A child or young person may face many kinds of losses. The death of a loved one is one of the heaviest experiences in life, and children and young people will always need support from reliable adults to cope with it. We have to remember that even small children have the ability to grieve and the need to express their emotions and thoughts caused by the loss. Grief is a healthy reaction to loss – you should encourage the child or young person to grieve, express their grief and remember their loved one. Honest acceptance and expression of emotions is linked to good health, because our bodies react to emotions even when they are repressed or not recognised.

A young person will typically regulate their emotions more carefully than a child. The young person will be more selecting in where, when and to whom they will show their grief. However, even a young child can push their emotions aside so as not to burden their grieving parent. A young person may hide their emotions for the same reason. Just because a child or young person acts normally, it does not mean that they do not need support to deal with the loss. A grieving person may also behave “very well”, trying to create a happier mood around them and at home. A child or young person who acts like this should not be excluded from support, as there is a risk that they won’t process their real emotions because they’re trying to behave well and protect others from grief.

When the other family members are going through the crisis as well, the grief of the child or young person may remain invisible. There isn’t always room for the child’s or young person’s emotions, and they may wait for their “turn”. Sometimes their grieving is delayed so much that people fail to associate their reactions

with the loss. A small child will grieve visibly intermittently. Because of this, adults may not notice that the loss is still affecting the child. Due to their developmental stage, a small child has a limited ability to verbalise their thoughts and experiences, and the grief will mostly be expressed in other ways.

On the other hand, personality differences will also affect the desire to talk about loss. For some people, talking is natural, whereas others will think about things by themselves and need more time and support to express them. Young people may withdraw simply because they’re growing independent and want to protect their territory and keep things to themselves.

”

**You should encourage the child or young person to grieve, express their grief and remember their loved one.**





The death of a family member is traumatic loss that will interfere with an individual's sense of safety. A child or a young person must process both the trauma and the grief. The child or young person should first be allowed to process the shock of the familiar everyday life ending and possible components of trauma (the young person may have been present at the time of death or in the accident that caused the loved one to die), so that they will have room for grief and longing.

**Most common immediate reactions following a traumatic experience:**

- shock and disbelief
- horror and denial
- indifference and numbness
- carrying on with ordinary activities.

Shock is a protective mechanism that gives a person the chance to process the news incrementally. An example of shock and disbelief is the bereaved person denying what has happened: "That's not true, you're lying." One person may react strongly at once, whereas another person will be paralysed and become apathetic. A child or young person may also carry on with their activities as though nothing has happened. When they do so, they are seeking safety in familiar things.

### **Possible aftereffects of a loved one's death:**

- fear and vulnerability
- grief and longing
- nervousness
- anger
- strong memories
- anxiety
- avoiding situations that remind you of what happened
- mental images
- feelings of guilt and shame
- difficulty sleeping
- physical symptoms
- looking for the deceased (small children)
- difficulty concentrating
- behavioral issues
- aggression
- regression
- trauma play
- feeling the presence of the deceased person
- emotional growth
- changes in personality
- trouble at school
- pessimism
- avoiding other people.

Behavioural changes are common in grieving children and young people. Their performance at school may change. Some find it hard to concentrate on their homework or in class, others may immerse themselves in the familiarity of it and do exceptionally well at school. The child or young person may feel the need to withdraw and process everything that has happened in peace. They may also seek safety in being alone.

A common after effect of the death of a family member is anxiety and fear that something will happen to you or another family member. A grieving child's need for security increases; they may become clingy and react strongly to separation.

Memories and mental images related to the death may be strong and disturbing, and attempts to repress them may manifest themselves as restlessness. The child may be thinking about these things especially in the evening and have trouble falling asleep. The child may wake up during the night and have nightmares.

A young person will also need reassurance. It takes sensitivity to figure out how the young person is willing to accept closeness. One person may cuddle up to their parent, another young person may accept a shoulder or foot massage. One person may find closeness with friends or a partner, another will be comforted by their pet. A young person may also seek security in certain type of music.

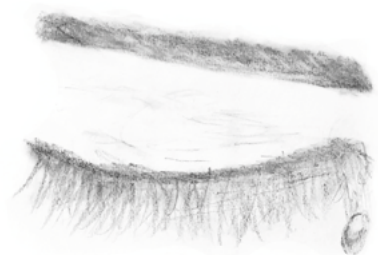
The emotional turmoil caused by grief will often surprise us with its duration and intensity. Emotions may change rapidly, and this may go on for long (anything from hours and days to months). However, they will become easier with time. A child does not have the life experience to

know you can overcome a loss and that even the worst emotions will lessen as time passes. It's possible that the child could not even imagine that such strong emotions existed.

”

**A young person  
will also need  
reassurance.**

Anger, fear, guilt, shame and sense of inferiority and helplessness are emotions that many bereaved people have had to deal with. Grief may manifest itself in extreme fits of anger and rage. All emotions should be allowed at home. If the loved ones are able to receive these emotions, the child will feel better. You can think about and practice constructive ways of expressing emotions that are perceived as negative. Sometimes grief will also manifest itself in physical reactions. Unexplained headache, stomach ache and gaining or losing weight are common symptoms. A child or a young adult will feel better if you tell them about the possible reactions and how



they can make themselves feel better. Young people will generally like it if you ask them what helps them when they feel bad.

Many grieving adolescents have said that they have felt weird and abnormal when grief has made them think about human existence. Children or young people may feel alone with these thoughts if adults fail to understand how much their loss affects them.



## 2. FACTORS THAT AFFECT HOW WE EXPERIENCE GRIEF

When a family member passes away, many different factors influence a person's reactions, experience of loss and their need for support. Similarly, many factors related to the person's self and life history play a role in how the death of a loved one affects them.

### **Whom did the child or young person lose?**

When a child's parent dies, the child loses a person who has loved them, taken care of them and fulfilled their basic needs. The child's everyday life will undergo a massive change, and the child may be worried about who will take care of the things that the deceased parents used to do. It's important for the child to know that they do not have to worry about who will cook them food and how the family is doing financially. The child may also be worried about losing the other parent as well. The child may find it comforting if you select an adult outside the family to take care of the child if something happened to the other parent as well. For the child's parent, the loss of a spouse means total single parenthood and sole responsibility for everyday obligations, child-rearing and supporting the grieving child. The death of a spouse entails many legal aspects as well, and taking care of them is time-consuming. For this reason, practical help in the family's everyday life is particularly important in widowed families.

One developmental task of adolescence is developing independence from parents. Many young people will distance themselves from their parents and may evaluate them very critically. A young person and their parent may often be annoyed with each other, and confrontations are common in this stage. If the

parent dies suddenly, the young person may feel guilty: "I feel bad that we parted in anger. I hope my parent knew that I liked them." The surviving parent or an outside adult should give the young person opportunities to share their thoughts. The adult's job is to tell the young person that their thoughts are normal.

When a family member dies, the child also loses their parents on the psychological level for a short time. This is called secondary loss of a parent: the parent does not have the strength to give the child or young person as much attention as they did before the crisis. The loss will also affect everyday life and how it's run.



***When a family member dies, the child also loses their parents on the psychological level for a short time.***

A young person especially may adopt an adult role in the family when the other parent passes away. The young person may be worried about the other parent and take on a heavy responsibility for running the everyday life. The young person may feel like they need to take care of housework and taking care of their siblings. The young person may also feel pressured to be easy and good so that they do not burden their parent in an already stressful situation. Individuation and asserting independence may take a less important role.

When a sibling dies, a child loses a playmate, rival and someone to grow up with. The emotional climate at home changes, and the children will have to redistribute their roles. If the child becomes an only child, the family dynamics change drastically. Sometimes a sister or a brother has been in a different stage in life and has been living on their own. In a situation such as this, the sibling may have been more distant or equally important, the admired "older older brother or sister".

A sibling being born dead is a massive crisis in which the child needs support. Even though the child has not actually lived with the sibling, the family has been waiting for the new sibling together. Even a small child can sense their parents' grief, although the child cannot fully understand what they have lost.

Similarly for young people, the meaning of the death of a sibling may vary depending on the sibling relationship. If the age gap has been small, the siblings may have put some distance to each other in adolescence after being playmates as children. Death takes away the opportunity to go through new stages together. On the other hand, adolescent siblings may have been very close, which makes the loss particularly devastating.

If the family has been expecting a new baby, the young person may have found it confusing, and they may have been critical about it. In case of stillbirth or infant death, the young person may feel guilty about previously wishing that there wouldn't be a new sibling.

The death of a grandparent is for many children the first time they lose a loved one. The child may have been very close to their grandparents, and the grandparents may have been a major presence in the child's life. A child or young person may also be deeply affected by the death of a close adult or friend. It's important to acknowledge all loss and grief that children and young people feel, regardless of a biological family relationship, living arrangements or how close the adults considered the deceased person. More and more children are living in single-parent households, blended families, family care families or LGBT families, and they may have people dear to them outside the family as well.

## Learning about what happened

The way a person hears about what has happened affects their reactions and experience of loss. You should never alter or conceal the truth about the death

”

***You should never alter or conceal the truth about the death of a loved one.***

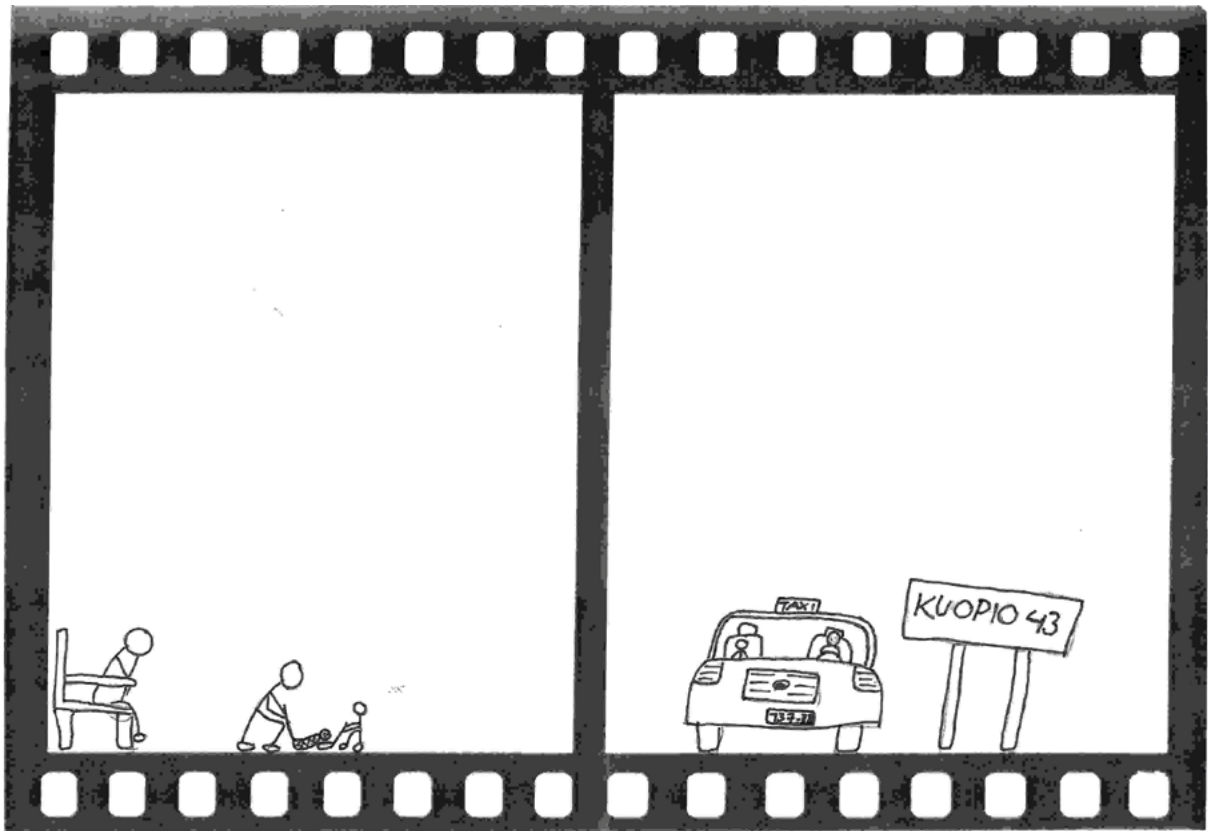
of a loved one. If nobody tells the child or young person the truth, they will be left with unanswered questions and uncertainties surrounding the death. They will try to gather information based on what the adults are saying and fill in the gaps with their im-

agination. This may cause misunderstandings and scary thoughts that have an adverse effect on the grieving process. Concealing the truth will undermine a child's trust in adults and decrease their sense of safety.

## The significance of attachment styles

An attachment style that develops between a child and a parent in early childhood interaction affects the way a child receives help in a traumatic situation. The child will try to reinstate their sense of safety through attachment behaviour.

A safe attachment style offers protection, resilience and coping methods in stressful situations. Insecurely attached children have troubles with their emotional expression and their coping methods are problematic. They either do not



trust adult help, or they may have unrealistic expectations for said help. An insecure attachment style makes it harder for a child to overcome their grief. Because of this, different attachment styles should be considered when thinking about a child's need for support and different support methods.

## Previous experiences

We all have an individual temperament which affects the way we react to things and how we process and share our life experiences with others. A child may have previous losses or traumatic experiences which are activated when a family member dies. It's useful to process these experiences as well. On the other hand, a child or a young person, in particular, may have accumulated many protective factors and tools to help them cope with grief over the course of their life.

## Family and environment

The parent's or parents' ability to function and the support the family receives influence the child's overall wellbeing. It's important for the child that their everyday needs are taken care of and everyday routines are maintained even in the midst of grief. Young people, too, are protected by "a sufficient amount of

normalcy” during an upheaval. An adult does not need to hide their emotions, because a child will imitate the behaviours of grieving adults. However, it's important to protect children from the more explosive moments of despair. Open communication in the family helps the child process their grief. It's easier for the child to express thoughts and emotions related to grief and death if the family is used to discussing difficult things.

The environment outside the family plays a role as well: how do early childhood education, the school, a hobby group or friends treat the grieving child? Other changes and stress factors in the child's life will also affect their reactions and need for support. Moving houses or changing schools, for example, will cause extra stress.

” **Open communication in the family helps the child process their grief.**

## **The nature of the death**

When a family member has an illness that could lead to death, the family may have discussed the illness and the possibility of death together. This gives people time to adjust to the idea of losing the loved one. Nevertheless, when the death becomes reality, people will tangibly understand what the death means and what it is like to live without the loved one. The pain caused by the death can be intense even though people have had time to get used to the idea.

How a child or young person experiences the death depends on what kind of memories they have of the person's illness. Did they have a chance to enjoy their time with the sick person, or did they have to see their loved one suffering and becoming a stranger?

When a family member has had a serious illness, the family life has been taxing for a long time. Living with the illness and its effects has required a lot of resources. Hearing the diagnosis, undergoing the rough treatments and deciding to stop the treatment are often traumatic situations. In case of a serious illness, people have had the opportunity to prepare for the death on some level. This does not make the death or grief easier, nor does it decrease the need for support. It's beneficial to discuss issues related to the death, the illness and its treatment with a child to dispel any uncertainties. The child may wonder, for example, whether everything was done to heal the loved one. You can also ask the doctor who treated the loved one to have a conversation with the family.



When the death has been sudden, people have not had the chance to prepare for it on any level. It may take a long time to comprehend what has happened. Suicide, homicide and situations where a child or young person discovers a dead person or has been involved in an accident in which a loved one dies are particularly devastating and difficult. These situations may also traumatise the people around the child and affect their ability to support the child.

Below is an example of a way to explain a suicide:

*"Dad's mental illness, depression, made life seem bleak for him when he was ill. When you're depressed, you may feel so hopeless that no matter how much you love the people around you, you can't think about anything except the present moment and how awful you're feeling. Dad ended his life in a moment like that. He put a rope around his neck in way that stopped his breathing and he died."*

Below is one way to explain a homicide:

*"Your big brother had bad luck. He ended up in a situation where someone was waving a knife around, and your brother was stabbed. This person who stabbed him must have had issues of his own that he didn't get enough help for. It's really rare that someone randomly attacks a stranger like this."*

Norwegian psychologists Magne Raundalen and Atle Dyregrov have stated that everything you tell a child must be true, but not everything that is true needs to be told. If, for example, a child's father has committed suicide, it's important for the child to know how he died. Otherwise, the child will sense that something is kept from them, and they will feel alone and confused. If the suicide was preceded by serious disagreements between the parents, you can explain the basics of the disagreement, but you should avoid going into details about any possible insults or offences.

If the media has been interested in the death (which may happen in case of an accident or homicide), the child may inadvertently and suddenly run into it in the media. You should discuss this possibility in advance. The death may be discussed in the news, and it's important to protect the child from this.

Below is an example of a discussion you can have:

*"People may write about X's death in the papers or talk about it on social media. Other people didn't know X like we did, so there may be a lot of misconceptions floating around. You shouldn't go looking up what others are saying. If you see anything that makes you feel bad or bothers you, I hope you can tell me, so that we can talk about it together."*

When a loved one has died by suicide, people may be worried about whether a young person will use the suicide as a model of getting rid of problems, and whether the pain of the loss can increase the young person's risk to commit

suicide. On the other hand, a suicide in the family may also be a preventive measure, because the child/young person has seen how much pain it causes the surviving people. You should tell the young person that difficulties in life will typically pass and there is help to be found, even though this loved one could not utilise the help.

”

**You should also talk about what kind of help is available.**

Together with the young person, you should think about different ways to take care of your mental health. You should also tell the young person what kind of mental health help is available.

After a death of a loved one, a child needs an adult to verbalise what has happened. Sometimes it can be difficult for adults as well to talk about the event. Adults can seek help from professional help or organisations specialised in grief counselling. (See chapters 8 and 9.)



### 3. MYTHS AND CLICHÉS ABOUT GRIEF

There are many myths and clichés about grief that invalidate the bereaved person's experience and right to grieve. They may prevent the bereaved person from expressing their grief and seeking help, even though these things would promote the bereaved person's wellbeing and survival. When supporting a grieving child and their family, try to avoid these clichés.

#### **"A child doesn't grieve"**

The way a child grieves is different from the adult way due to the child's linguistic and cognitive development. Children express their grief in a way that is typical of children; they may not have the vocabulary to verbalise their emotions, experiences and thoughts. However, this does not mean that the child is not grieving. A child's grief is just as deep as that of an adult, and grief will consume a child's time and resources in much the same way. Even though the child may lead a normal everyday life and play in the midst of grief, it does not mean that they have forgotten about the loss or that their grief is over.

Similarly, it is impossible to tell whether a young person is grieving or not just because they are not displaying such emotions or verbalising their grief. It's important to give the young person opportunities to share their thoughts, even if they do not always seize those opportunities.

#### **"A child won't understand"**

Sometimes people don't tell a child about things related to the death because they think that the child won't understand. People may also think that it's important to protect the child from distressing or difficult things. However, the child will feel the need figure out what has happened. The child will also hear and understand things much better than adults think. Uncertainty and the scary mental imagery that follows may confuse and upset the child more than the truth.

A young person's understanding of death almost resembles adulthood understanding. When faced with a loss, a young person may feel tempted to seek understanding that goes beyond their age level. It's important to give the young person opportunities to reflect on their thoughts with an adult.

## **"Don't be sad"**

It may be hard for an adult to see a child or young person grieving and suffering. It's difficult to accept that you cannot help the child by simply taking the grief away. In situations such as this, someone may say, "Don't be sad, at least they're longer ill," or, "Don't be sad, they're in a better place now." These words are meant as comfort, but they also imply that you shouldn't grieve. For the bereaved person's wellbeing, the message should be the exact opposite. You should encourage the child or young person to grieve, express their grief and remember their loved one.

## **"Replace the loss"**

Another way of trying to comfort the child or young person is to try and replace the grief with something pleasant. This type of behaviour relies on the idea that you can replace the loss with something and make the grief go away that way. This approach minimises the child's grief, emotions and right to express them. It also sends the child the wrong message about people being replaceable. A grieving adult will also be offended by similar suggestions: "You still have time to have more kids," or "You're so young, you'll find another spouse."



## **"Grieve alone"**

People have different ways of thinking and behaving that develop throughout their life history. The idea that you should keep misfortunes to yourself and overcome them alone has been a common one in recent Finnish history. When faced with a child's grief, an adult may remember loss experiences of their own. If the adult feels distressed and doesn't know how to act, they may try to escape the situation by saying, "I'm sure you want to be alone for a while." This gives the child the impression that grief should be hidden, or that at least the grieving should be done alone.

## **"Be strong"**

Common things that grieving people hear are, "You'll have to be strong now," or "You'll just have to carry on." If the bereaved person is a child, they may be told, "You must help mum and/or dad now." Strength is understood as not showing your grief or emotions. The child is quick to learn this model and hide their real emotions. There is a risk that the child becomes the adult in the family, takes on too much responsibility at home and starts to "take care of" their parents, siblings or the whole family. This is not the child's job; a child has the right to childhood despite the loss.



***A child has the right to childhood despite the loss.***

## **"Keep busy"**

A grieving child may be "treated" with activities, whereas a grieving adult may be treated with work. People believe that these things will keep the bereaved person from thinking about the grief and thus forget about it. However, you cannot erase grief with constant activities. On the contrary, there is a risk that this only prolongs the grief, and that the grief stagnates. Children will imitate adults in this respect as well. They may try to keep painful emotions at bay by constantly having something to do. A busy lifestyle while grieving causes as much stress to an adult as it does to a child.

Many young people are future-oriented. They may think it's important that they do well at school and keep studying to protect their future. Similarly, many hobbies require a high level of commitment. A young person may escape their grief by dedicating themselves to familiar activities.

## ***"Time heals all wounds – it'll be all right"***

"Time heals all wounds" is one of the most common myths about grief. It's true that when a person grieves, processes their loss, remembers their loved one and is supported in their grief, the pain will ease little by little. However, time alone

”

***Grief is not a bad thing, but a natural reaction to loss and a part of normal life.***

will not help. It's good for a child or young person to know that you don't have to "heal". They don't have to aim for a state where they forget about the deceased person and are no longer missing them. Rather, "healing" means that the bereaved person

keeps their precious memories but thinking about them no longer hurts so much. They may occasionally be sad or miss their dead loved one. However, life has a meaning, and it goes on, bringing along happy things. It's important to learn that grief is not a bad thing, but a natural reaction to loss and a part of normal life.

## ***"I understand – I know how you feel"***

Everybody's grief is individual and each experience unique. We can't fully relate to another person's experience and understand their loss, even if we had gone through a similar loss. As adults, we cannot always reach a child's or young adult's experience and thinking, even though we wanted to. It's important to respect everybody's individual grief by avoiding the words above.

## ***"Are you still grieving? – It's been so long"***

Grief takes a lot of time, and it may return strong even a long time after the event. A bereaved person is entitled to their emotions, memories and expressions of grief in their own way and at their own pace. Comments and advice such as the ones above on the "right" time to grieve and expectations of how a person should act are insulting to the bereaved person.



## 4. HOW CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT DEATH

Growing up, a child will process the death and the emotions caused by the loss several times, and each time slightly differently. The child will find new ways to remember the dead loved one and tries to adjust to an environment where the loved one is no longer present. When faced with the death of a loved one, a child's naïve outlook on the world changes. The world is no longer the same safe and happy place in which wishes come true.

The way a child understands death depends on their age, but also on the child's cognitive development. It is also influenced by the child's previous experiences and the way in which the family deals with things. For these reasons, notions about death are highly individual, and the age categorisation below is only indicative.

With special needs children and young people, it's important to pay attention to factors arising from their needs, such as those related to developmental disabilities or the autism spectrum. Sometimes a child does not communicate using speech. Sign-supported speech, drawing, social stories (when preparing for the funeral, for example) and pictures are useful aids when telling them about the event or discussing it. A special needs child is still first and foremost a child, and they have the same need and right to process their grief as other children.

### Younger than 2 years old

A child younger than 2 years old does not understand the concept of death, but they will notice that a person they know is missing. Even small babies are capable of grieving, as they can sense their parents' emotional reactions. A baby or a toddler may express their grief by crying more, becoming apathetic or refusing to eat. A toddler may react to the loss by seeking the deceased person. As the child's language develops, you can talk with them about the death and help the child create memories about the dead loved one. This will help the child to process the loss later.

### Ages 2 to 5

A child between the ages of 2 and 5 may imagine that a dead person can still feel different emotions and act like living people. The child may ask concrete things about the deceased person, such as whether the person is still eating, talking or breathing. If the child is told that the dead person "went to heaven", the child may think that the dead person went there voluntarily and wonder



why people aren't bringing the dead person back. It's important to be very clear when answering the child's questions. It's also acceptable to say, "I don't know", if the child asks a question that you don't know the answer to. You should be patient with the child's questions, because the child is trying to understand the event by asking the same questions over and over again.

A small child believes that they are capable of anything, and they may believe that they caused the death with their thoughts, actions or words. You should tell the child clearly that the death was not their fault. The child may also feel guilty for bringing up the dead person, because it makes other family members sad. The child may want to protect others from grief by not talking about the death.



***The child may want to protect others from grief by not talking about the death.***

An adult should tell the child that it's okay to talk about the death even if it makes the adult sad.

A small child may also believe that they can bring the dead person back with their thoughts, actions or wishes, because

a toddler does not yet understand the permanence of death. The child may suggest leaving the light on in the hallway so that the dead person can see when they come back. A child's concept of time is circular: you wake up in the morning, stay up during the day, sleep at night and wake up again in the morning. Due to this circular thinking, the child also believes that the dead person will come back: we live, we die and we live again. Nevertheless, even small children must be told that dead people cannot come back.

## **Ages 6 to 9**

As a child's thinking develops, the child begins to understand that death is irreversible and can happen to anyone. Understanding the limitedness of existence and the irreversibility of death can make the child fear death and loss. The child may imagine death as a character, such as a vampire or a troll, after seeing scary characters on TV or in comics. Sometimes, a child may avoid talking about the dead person, because they're afraid that this will make death come and claim either the child or another loved one. Little by little the child will begin to understand the cause and effect behind the death.

The child may be very interested in what the dead person looks like and what happens to the body after the burial. It's best to answer these questions as honestly and clearly as possible. This type of curiosity is normal, as it helps the child understand what has happened.



## **Ages 10 to 13**

A pre-adolescent child understands the permanence of death. The child begins to think about the long-term effects that the death of a loved one has on their life. They may think about the fact that the dead loved one will not be there to share the important moments of coming months and years with the child. The death of a loved one makes the pre-adolescent child feel different from their peers. Same-aged friends are important, but they may seem childish. Young people may feel like none of their friends understands them. They may also be surprised by their rapidly changing emotions. This can be confusing and scary. A young person needs an adult to tell them that these feelings are normal. A young person between the ages of 10 and 13 may also think about the possibility of their own death.

## **Ages 14 to 18**

A young person contemplates the meaning of everything. Planning the future may seem difficult when you're thinking about the limitedness of life. On the other hand, the young person may keep themselves busy to avoid facing their emotions and questions that are bothering them. Keeping busy may seem like a good way to control the situation if the young person feels like they can't control their emotions when staying still.

In adolescence, many people have optimistic hopes for the future. This sort of orientation may empower and cheer up the bereaved young person. Dreams and goal-oriented actions are a good counterbalance to adversities.

While you should not force a young person to process their loss, it's important that the young person knows that they have people supporting them. It's common that young people do not want to talk about all their thoughts with their parents. You can also give them the possibility to talk to another reliable adult. Although a young person's concept of death is similar to adult's, their emotional life is still developing. It's important that the young person has support for processing the event and the emotions arising from it.

If the young person does not want to listen or talk about the loss even when they're given the opportunity, it's best to give them time. The important thing is to ask the young person every now and then whether they would be in the mood to talk about it. Having as many options as possible increases the likelihood that the young person accepts support.



**Different options include:**

- parent / student welfare worker / psychotherapist / familiar adult, such as a godparent or friend's parent
- face to face / remotely / in writing.



## **5. HOW LOVED ONES CAN SUPPORT A GRIEVING CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON**

### **Give truthful information and have honest discussions**

You should tell the child/young person about the death as soon as it has happened. A parent is a child's nearest adult and it's natural for them to inform the child. You should tell the child the essential facts of the death honestly and clearly, in a language that the child understands.

You should use real words such as "dead" and "death". A small child thinks concretely, so it's best not to describe death as sleep or the final journey. Using words such as these may make the child afraid of falling asleep or going on a journey, as they will associate these things with death.

A young person's understanding of death is similar to an adult's in many ways. However, it's important to protect the young person and evaluate which things the young person needs to hear. A practical example: if the person has died as a result of

a suicide or homicide, it's essential to tell this to the young person. However, you don't have to tell them explicit details about the method. If the young person asks for specific information, it's best to tell them – balancing between the truth, the right amount of information and the right words. When the facts are painful, it's good to think about sources of comfort as well.



***It's best not to describe death as sleep or the final journey.***

When a family member dies, a child's sense of security is disturbed. After hearing about the death, the child will often have an increased need for closeness



and contact. It's important that the child is not left alone. You should tell the child that they have adults to support them and that they will be taken care of. It's a good idea to hold and hug the child often and be available to them. Every child and young person has an individual reaction to closeness and an adult must respect this by figuring out the right ways to offer closeness. Having an adult nearby and available is beneficial for a young person as well, even if the young person would prefer to withdraw and have some space.



***You should tell the child that they have adults to support them and that they will be taken care of.***

You should encourage the child to talk and ask questions about the death. The child may ask the same questions repeatedly, and you should be patient with this. Even if you don't have answers to all the questions, you should tell the child that you can think about things related to death together.

Due to their development stage, a child may be uncertain or have wrong ideas about the death. Magical thinking may cause the child to avoid talking about the event, as the child believes that it will happen again if you talk about it. Imagination and magical thinking are ways in which the child protects themselves from thoughts that make them feel unsafe. The child may also come up with wrong explanations for the death. Open discussion prevents the child from forming these wrong ideas and makes the child feel better.

The child may also blame themselves for what happened and think that death is a punishment for their thoughts or acts. It's important to talk about these things as well and emphasise that what happened could not be the child's fault. Severe feelings of guilt may arise if the child was present when the death occurred.

Egocentric thinking is typical of pre-schoolers, who believe that they are the centre and capable of everything. Normally this egocentric thinking promotes the child's curiosity and development of self-esteem. However, when a child is processing a death, this egocentrism may lead to feelings of guilt as the child believes that they should have been able to prevent the death. You should take the child's fears and feelings of guilt seriously.

Together, you can look for solutions and coping methods. While the child should be allowed to talk about their feelings of guilt, it must be made absolutely clear to them that their actions or thoughts did not cause the death. Like adults, young people may have irrational feelings of guilt, and it's important that they are given opportunities to talk about those feelings.

## Give time and space to process the grief

It's important that a child or young person has the "permission" to grieve. The child or young person should be told that it's all right for them to express their grief and that they don't have to cope on their own. You should proceed on the child's terms. Give the child attention and time when they are willing to talk about their grief. The conversation can be short or just individual questions, after which the child goes on with their activities.

You should not place any demands on the child or expect too much of the child by saying, "You'll have to be strong now." These types of demands may prevent the child from expressing their grief. Every child has an individual way of grieving, and these ways can vary even among siblings. It's important that these differences are accepted and not compared.

Small children face their loss and process death in ways that are typical of them: playing, drawing, painting, and through stories, fictional characters, music and movement. It's important that an adult accepts the different ways in which a grieving child is processing a death.

Similarly, young people may employ creative ways to process their emotions, such as music or art. It's also common for young people to devote their time to activities that they find natural: constructive ways include school, hobbies, family and friendships, whereas destructive ways include substance use and disruptive behaviour.

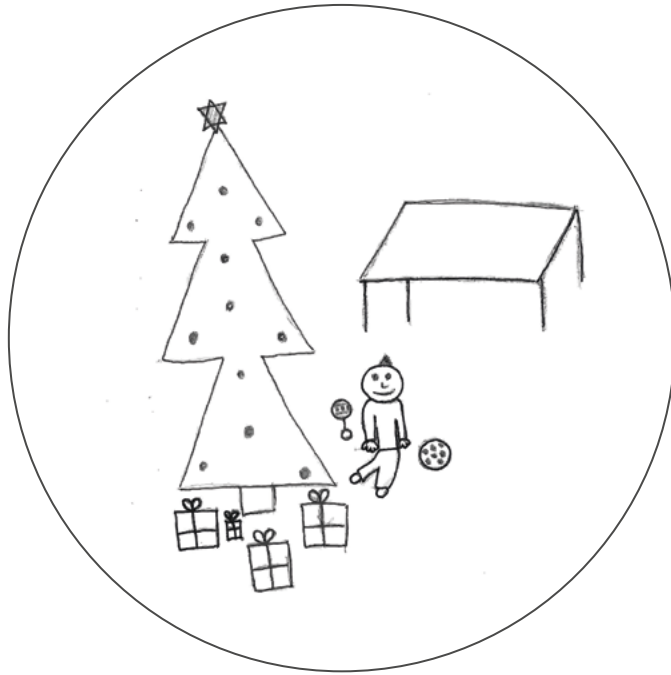


**Young people may also employ creative ways to process their emotions.**

Grief takes time and energy. Because of this, it's important that adults are ready to process the event a long time afterwards. As the child grows, they will look at their loss from different perspectives. The pain will ease with time, but the dead loved one is allowed to live on in the child's memories throughout the child's life.

## Promote a sense of security with everyday routines

Maintaining everyday routines will strengthen the grieving child's or young person's sense of security. However, the child may be too tired to think about routines immediately after the loss. It's best to consider the child's individual needs and think about how and which routines should be maintained. You should avoid unnecessary changes in your life and inform the child of possible changes



beforehand. You should also stick to the rules and boundaries established in the family and avoid overprotectiveness and excessive caution.

You should have an open discussion with the child or young person about what and who in their everyday life do they want to know about the death. Together with the child or young person, you can think about different ways of talking and not talking about the death and the possible consequences (for more information about returning to school or kindergarten, see chapter 6). Regardless of their grief, the child or young person has the right to live a carefree and age-appropriate life. You should encourage them to lead a normal everyday life, including hobbies and friendships.

## **Encourage expression and processing of emotions**

Grief causes all kinds of emotions. You should tell the child or young person that different emotions are normal when grieving. It's important for the child or young person to hear that they're allowed to be angry. It can be difficult for a child and even for a young person to acknowledge their emotions, which is why an adult can help them recognise, express and process their grief. An adult does not have to hide their emotions, because a child imitates an adult's grief behaviour.

Death makes us ask fundamental questions about life. An adult can share their own view on life and tell the child that people have different views. You should be

respect the views that the child has and finds comforting. If you have a Christian worldview, you can comfort the child by saying that there is no pain in heaven and that we will be reunited with our loved ones again.

## **Help the child remember and make the loss real**

A child or young person should participate in different mourning rituals, such as saying goodbye to the dead person, the funeral and memorial service. These things will help the child understand what death means and prevent the child from developing misunderstandings and fears. Different rituals give the child the opportunity to understand and process the event on an emotional level and share it with their loved ones. It's important to prepare the child to these events carefully beforehand by telling the child what will happen and making sure that they have a safe adult looking after them at all times.

You should encourage (but not pressure or force) the child or young person to look at the dead person, because seeing a dead person will not harm the child. On the contrary, this will help the child understand the finality of death. The child

won't develop scary ideas as easily if they can see with their own eyes what the dead person looks like. You should tell the child beforehand what the dead person will look like, where they are and how the child can say goodbye. Proceed on the child's terms. You should reserve enough time for saying goodbye and processing the event afterwards. If the dead person has been injured in an accident, for example, professionals can tell you what you should do.

The child or young person can also participate in planning the funeral by choosing flowers, hymns or poems. It's a good idea to tell the child how adults may act at a funeral so that the child isn't alarmed by the strong reactions. The child may say goodbye to the dead person by placing a drawing or letter on the coffin. The letter or drawing may be related to something that the child would have wanted to tell the dead person. These types of tangible farewells and expressions of grief help the bereaved.

You can create different rituals for remembering and practical ways of expressing grief. For example, you can remember the dead person by looking at photographs and sharing memories. You can also collect memories into a special book or box. It's important that the dead person is allowed to be present in everyday talk. The child may want to keep the dead person's belongings close to them.



***It's important for the child or young person to hear that they're allowed to be angry.***

For example, lying under a blanket may help the child feel safe. A young person may want to wear a t-shirt that belonged to the dead person. These types of transitional objects may bring the dead loved one closer and alleviate feelings of insecurity.

## **Keep an eye on the child's/young person's wellbeing**

As you slowly go back to everyday life after the death of a loved one, pay attention to the child's or young person's wellbeing. Different symptoms are normal. You can look at their wellbeing from these points of view:

- How are the basics going: kindergarten, club, school and/or hobbies?
- Does the child or young person eat and sleep sufficiently well?
- What is their relationship with their family, peers and other adults in their everyday life like?
- Does the child or young person express other emotions besides gloominess? Does it seem like the child or young person is afraid to express different emotions?
- What kind of opportunities does the child or young person have to talk and express their emotions?

If you are worried about the young person's wellbeing, you can ask them directly what life feels like for them in this situation. If their answer reinforces your concern, it's best to find out incrementally whether the young person has self-destructive thoughts or suicidal ideation. If this is the case, ask them if they have concrete plans to carry out a suicide. Asking about self-destructiveness does not increase the risk of suicidal behaviour – it helps you figure out the young person's need for help and organise it urgently, if needed (at psychiatric emergency services, for instance).

## **Take care of your own wellbeing**

It hurts to see a child grieve. Supporting the child is demanding for the family and loved ones when they too have lost a loved one. Despite the grief, everyday life and work place demands on us. It's important to remember that taking care of your own wellbeing promotes the entire family's wellbeing. You should have mercy on yourself and give grief time. Try not to demand too much of yourself or the child. After the death of a loved one, children and young people have the tendency to worry about the family members who are affected by the loss. You should tell the child or young person that they do not have to worry about family members' wellbeing, as these family members have other people supporting them as well.



You should accept help from people close to you. It's a good idea to think about which things you could receive outside help for to save your strength. You can then use this strength to take care of your and your children's wellbeing. Home help, reduction of working time and peer support may help. Do not hesitate to seek professional help.



## 6. THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

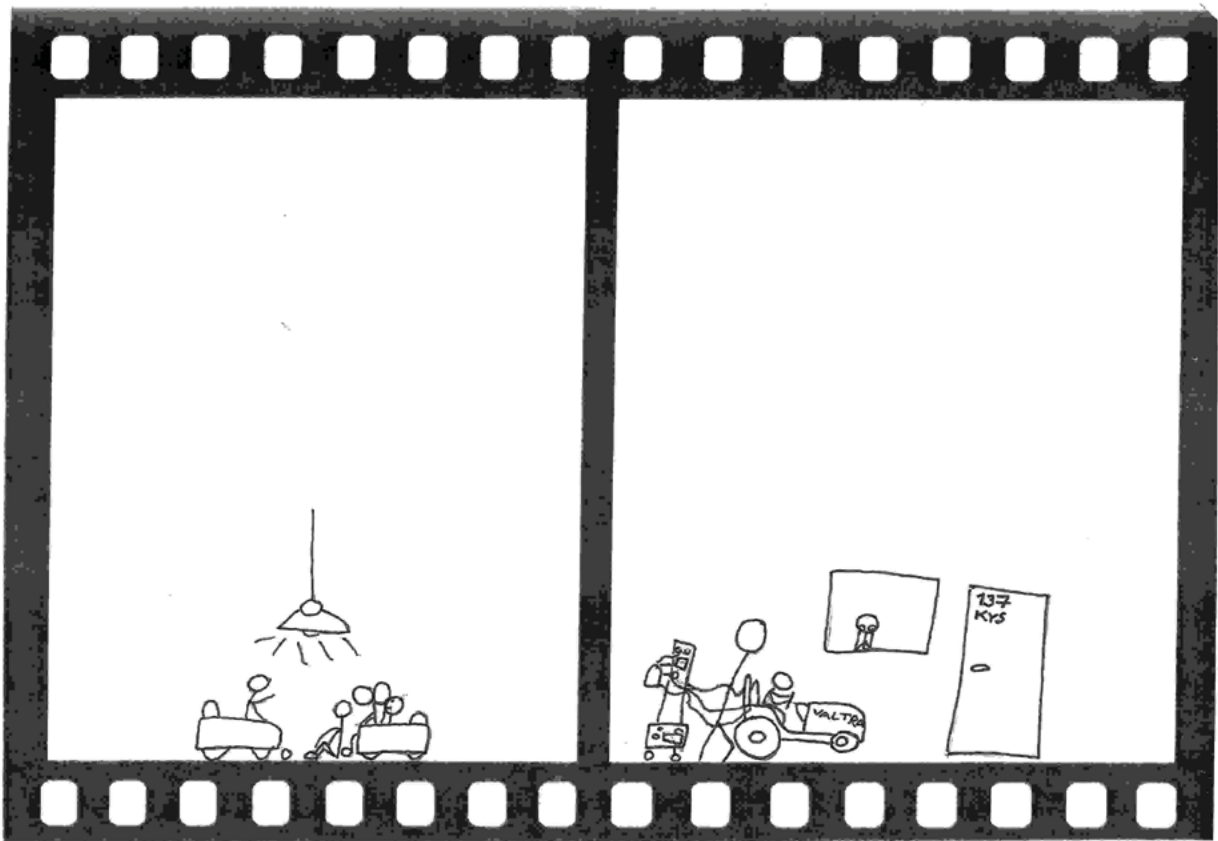
### Meeting the family

A family that has lost a loved one has limited resources, and seeking support may feel overwhelmingly difficult. A family in a crisis may also think that they have to survive without outside help. For this reason, it's important that an adult working with children or young people takes an active role in supporting and contacting the family. An employee may call the family to offer their condolences; the school or kindergarten may send the family a card and flowers. The children in the child's group may make cards and send letters to the family. There are no right words that you have to use when meeting a grieving family – the important thing is that you are present and compassionate. The contact must be natural, and it's important to avoid the expressions listed in the "Myths and clichés about grief" chapter.

Often, the most difficult aspect of supporting a grieving person is tolerating your own uncertainty and helplessness. Facing the family's grief may remind you of losses of your own. For this reason, a person supporting a bereaved family should examine their relationship with death. Nevertheless, families will greatly appreciate your courage to meet them. The worst thing from a grieving family's point of view is to avoid them and leave them alone with their grief.



**Families  
will greatly  
appreciate your  
courage to  
meet them.**



Adults working at school or kindergarten should have enough information on what has happened to discuss the event with the child. It's important that every teacher shows the child by some means that they know about the loss.

Parents should be informed of worrying things as well, as openness is the best way to support the child. For example, the school should monitor the child's absences and bring them up with the child and the parents if necessary.

It's important that a professional considers the diversity of families and cultures. A good way to figure out what the family needs and how they grieve their loved one is to directly ask them what they need and what might help them.

## Returning to school or kindergarten

Familiar routines support the child's sense of security. Often, it's best to let the child return to school or kindergarten as soon as possible. In many cases the child wants to go back to the everyday things. However, many children are nervous about going back to school or kindergarten because they are worried that they will be pitied and singled out. Children are quick to tease others for being different, and losing a loved one is not an exception to this rule.

The flow of information to the school or day-care personnel must be taken care of, but in a way that considers the family's wishes. The school or kindergarten should be notified of the death of a family member before the child returns.

It's important that the entire staff knows how the event may affect the child's behaviour, concentration and learning. Teachers, for example, have to agree on who informs the school nurse, school social worker and people teaching the child about the child's situation. One of the teachers, such as the child's homeroom teacher, could be the person informing the other teachers according to the family's wishes. The homeroom teacher can also be a special support person to whom the child can turn if needed. It may be a good idea to have regular and closer contact with the school, kindergarten and family than usually.

The kindergarten or school has to agree with the family on what and how the child's friends are informed of the death. This is always an adult's responsibility, but you can agree with the child whether they want to be the one to tell others, or whether an adult should do it. This is also a good opportunity to tell others how the child

wishes to be treated and how grief may affect the child. You can also agree on what the other children's parents will be told about the situation. Perhaps you can send the families a letter that notifies them about what has happened. Telling the other parents is a way to avoid misunderstandings, and it also gives the families the chance to monitor their children's reactions.

At school, the teacher should have a quiet moment with the child and their classmates to have this conversation. The class can discuss the event and the emotions caused by losing a loved one together. The teacher can ask the child what type of behaviour they expect of their friends, and encourage the classmates to support the child. The teacher should ask the child beforehand which things the child wants to bring up in this conversation. If the child does not want to be present in this conversation, the teacher can have the conversation with the classmates and tell them the child's wishes before the child returns to school. A conversation like this will help the classmates understand how they can support their grieving friend. It will also ease the bereaved child's pain to know that others are aware of the situation. This way, the child does not have to be nervous about when and where the death comes up. You can tell the child, "I know what has happened to your family, and you can talk about it with me anytime, if you want."



***The kindergarten or school has to agree with parents on how the child's friends are informed of the event.***

It's important to note whether the child has friends with whom they can talk about the event. Sharing it with friends may ease the pain, but the child does not necessarily have the kind of friends with whom they could or would like to talk about the death – or maybe they would, but don't know how to do it. Often a child wants to withdraw from others after a loss. The child is also vulnerable, which may lead to loneliness. The teacher can help by letting best friends work in the same groups and sit next to each other at the cafeteria. This way the child can be with those who they find it easy to be with.

It's often especially hard for grieving young people to ask for help. Adults may also find it difficult to bring up the subject with a young person. You can have a one-on-one discussion with the young person and ask what has happened,



***It's often especially hard for grieving young people to ask for help.***

when the funeral will be, how the young person has been feeling and what they have been thinking about after the loss of a loved one. It's also important to ask whether they have been able to eat, sleep and talk to people about the death. It's possible that the young person won't tell you

much, but asking these questions lets them know that the adult is not afraid to talk about the event, and that the young person can turn to this adult if necessary.

As the child transfers from primary school to lower secondary school (or changes schools otherwise), it's important to tell the new teachers about the death as well. Together with the child, you can think about what and how the child should tell their new classmates about the death. If the child doesn't bring it up until much later at the new school, the discussion may feel much more daunting. Sometimes the child or young person does not want that their friends are told about the death. However, you should encourage the child to talk and help them understand that telling about the event makes it easier for them in the long run.

## **How loss affects behaviour**

You should tell the child or young adult that all kinds of emotions are normal and allowed. It's important for the child or young person to know that emotions ease when they are processed and discussed. For example, if they exhibit anger by acting aggressively, you can talk about how to vent that anger in ways that does not harm the child/young person or other people. It may also help to know what the child or young person can do if they start to cry, where the tissues are and with whom they can talk when they feel down. A small child can also carry a soft toy that they can cuddle whenever they feel sad.

A school-aged child can be given a time-out card that they can use to leave the classroom if they're feeling bad. You can tell the child or young person who they can go and talk to (such as school nurse or school welfare worker) when this happens. The child's concentration may suffer from the loss. The child may also be more tired and passive than before. The child may also need more help than normally. One solution to this is reducing homework for a while. The school can offer the child alternative methods of study for some things. However, it's important to stick to rules and expectations for the child, as this will increase the child's sense of security.

## **Continued support**

The school or kindergarten staff can nominate an adult who takes responsibility for continued support. The effects that the loss has on the child's school performance can appear months or years later, and people may not realise they are connected to the loss. Even the child may not know why they are feeling so bad. It's important that the child has the opportunity to discuss the loss with an adult they know even a long time after the death.

The adult does not have to become "a therapist" – they can be the same safe adult as they were before. It's enough to listen and show that you care. If needed, you can direct the child to further support. It's all too common to think that you should avoid talking about the loss with the child or the family so as not to burden them. However, offering the opportunity to talk may be something that the family expects and values, even if time has passed.

In the coming years, the bereaved people will face many situations that evoke strong emotions and memories. These dates include the date of death, birthdays, Christmas, end-of-term celebrations and Mother's and Father's Day. It's a good idea to talk about these situations with the child or young person and ask them what they would like to do. The teacher or another adult can make a list of important dates, when the child is likely to reminisce about their dead loved one more than usually. This list can look like a family tree, for example. Often the child feels more at ease when the school or day-care centre knows how important these dates are. It helps the adults consider the effect that these days may have on the child.



## 7. PEER SUPPORT

**”** *What has helped me is crying a lot, family weekends and therapy. Teachers, childminders and friends have just got in the way of my survival. My friends are so childish that they didn't understand. Childminders have left or feared me, teachers think it has nothing to do with school. I have felt understood at Käpy's family weekends. I've been able to share my thoughts, paint my grief, joy, anger, and life before my sister's death. I have sculpted clay, slammed clay down on the table, flown on magic carpets...*

Peer support groups for children who have lost a loved one have been organised in Finland for two decades, but the activity is still not nationally established. Organisers have looked to Estonia, Britain and the United States which have longer experience with arranging children's and young people's grief camps. Children's peer support models have also been developed for children impacted by parents' substance abuse or domestic violence. Furthermore, peer support groups for fostered children and children whose parents have separated have become more common. These group models employ the same theoretical backgrounds and frameworks. At present, children's peer groups have yielded many encouraging results.

The child does not have to have psychological or social symptoms to participate in a peer group for children who have lost a loved one. Each child should have the opportunity to participate in an age-appropriate group, where they can process their loss and emotions with the help of a safe adult. Children benefit from the presence and support of their peers as much as adults do.

In a peer group, the child gets the opportunity to share their experiences, recognise and express their emotions and learn coping skills from the other children. One benefit of peer groups is that people who have gone through a similar experience understand each other best. The child will feel like they are not alone or the only one who has lost a loved one.

Peer groups utilise elements related to club activities, play and education. With children, it's common to rely too heavily on verbal expression even though other means of expression would be more natural. For a child, creativity and use of



imagination are just as obvious as everyday thinking for an adult. A child can only focus on things for a short amount of time. These things will be considered when planning peer support groups. The functional methods utilised in the groups will make it easier to process difficult topics.

Children's peer support groups can take many forms. They can last from one day to a weekend, or they can meet up once a week, six to eight times in total. Even a brief experience of meeting peers and sharing things can be meaningful.

The current understanding of grief suggests that grief is a process of making memories. We do not encourage forgetting; instead, we try to build a strong memory of the dead loved one. Because of this, reminiscing is an important theme of children's peer support groups.

”

***Even a brief experience of meeting peers and sharing things can be meaningful.***

A young adult may benefit from peer support as much as other age groups. However, adolescents are at an age where they may find it difficult to participate in such activities. A small child will easily go where their parent says they should go. A young adult makes choices more independently and will be more

critical of participating.

It's important to make sure that the young adult has enough information on how the peer support is arranged so that misconceptions don't prevent the young adult from participating.

**A young person may be apprehensive about the following things:**

- What if I do something embarrassing? What if I start to cry when I talk about the dead loved one? Can I even talk about it? What if hearing people talk about death makes me feel awful? Maybe I can't go through with it.
- Are the other people there all right?
- Are they going to have us do something childish like icebreaker games?

The working methods in young people's peer support groups are similar to those in adult groups. The activities proceed mainly through conversation. Small exercises or creative activities may be used to encourage and summarise thoughts. Sometimes, young people may find it difficult to express their thoughts, and the counsellors have to be more active to facilitate reflection. This can be done by using (possibly anonymous) writing as a group method, or by borrowing other young people's experiences with grief in literature.

For more information on organisations that arrange peer support for children and adults, see chapter 9.





## 8. WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

It's normal that a child or young person reacts to the death of a loved one in many different ways, and the emotions may vary greatly even much later. However, sometimes grief leads to a situation where professional help is needed.

### **Some signs that the child or young person may need professional help:**

- the child does not live age-appropriately
- the child regresses, i.e., acts like a much younger person
- the child acts like a much older person or like an adult
- the child blames themselves heavily
- the child doesn't play, or the play is traumatic and doesn't move past the trauma
- relationships with peers and/or adults become narrower
- the child has clear symptoms, such as fears or aggressive behaviour that affect normal life
- behaviour and personality change drastically. For a young adult, this may mean risk behaviour such as substance abuse, self-destructiveness or social disruptiveness.
- the child takes on too much responsibility for their loved ones
- the child has a pessimistic outlook on the future
- you are worried about the child/young person and want support and advice.

### **Traumatic stress reaction:**

In chapter one, we discussed common reactions following the death of a loved one. These reactions tend to become less intense with time. However, a child who has experienced a traumatic loss can develop a post-traumatic stress reaction, in which these reactions last longer and form a certain type of group. Post-traumatic stress reaction includes three reaction groups that can be defined as following:

1. Reliving the event in dreams or thoughts or feeling like it will happen again. Restlessness in situations that remind the child of the traumatic event.
2. Constantly avoiding stimuli that remind the child of the event; narrowed range of emotions and loss of interest in the person's surroundings and other people.
3. Heightened physical alertness, readiness for observing and facing danger.

If this type of reaction model continues for over a month, the child or young person could benefit from professional help.

**Professional help for children and young people:**

- crisis centres and crisis work groups
- health care personnel
- maternity clinics and maternity clinic psychologists
- family counselling centres
- youth clinics
- school and student welfare services  
(school social worker, psychologists and nurses)
- psychiatric specialist medical care
- child and adolescent psychotherapy
- social services organised by municipalities under the Social Welfare Act
- home service for families with children.



## 9. HELP FROM NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND PARISHES

The following non-governmental organisations help bereaved families. Many of these organisations have separate activities for children and young people in addition to those aimed at adults. For more information and contact details, see the organisation's website.

### **KÄPY – Child Death Families KÄPY ry**

[www.kapy.fi](http://www.kapy.fi)

### **Nuoret Lesket ry** (support for young widows)

[www.nuoretlesket.fi](http://www.nuoretlesket.fi)

### **Surunauha ry** (peer support after a loved one's suicide)

[www.surunauha.net](http://www.surunauha.net)

### **Huoma – Henkirikoksen uhrien läheiset ry** (peer support for loved ones of homicide victims)

[www.huoma.fi](http://www.huoma.fi)

### **MIELI Mental Health Finland**

[www.mieli.fi](http://www.mieli.fi)

### **Cancer Society of Finland**

[www.cancer.fi/syopajarjestot/](http://www.cancer.fi/syopajarjestot/)

### **Sylva ry** (support for children and young adults with cancer and their loved ones)

[www.sylva.fi](http://www.sylva.fi)

Other patient organisations will also provide support for people who have lost a loved one to illness. For more information, contact the patient organisation directly or check the organisation's website.

Parish workers may also provide support. Hospital and parish pastors as well as diaconal workers offer counselling to those in need. Many parishes also provide grief groups for adults and children.



## PRACTICAL TIPS

Listed below are some examples of functional methods that can be utilised to help children and young people process their loss and the emotions stemming from the loss. For more practical tips, see the books listed in the bibliography.

### **Storycrafting with a hand puppet**

Tell the child that they can tell the hand puppet anything they want. Write the story down word for word and read it to the child. The child can amend the story if they want. The child may also draw pictures related to the story.

### **Making a book**

The child can draw (or write) about a given topic. The pages will then be bound into a book. Some examples of the topic include my family, memories, memory of the funeral, things that make me happy, things that worry me, things that scare me, things that help when I'm feeling scared, things that I'm good at, wishes for the future, etc. You can also add stories that the child has told to the book. An alternative for this is to fill in the "My grief" workbook, which is listed in the children's and young people's bibliography.

### **Comic**

The child can draw a comic about the event. You can tell the child that they can decide when to look at the comic and who to show it to. The first drawing may depict what happened before the death of a loved one. The next drawings may represent how the loved one died, what happened afterwards and what life has been like since then. What does life look like now?

### **Memory box**

The child can cover a shoebox with wallpaper or gift wrap. The shoebox can also be painted or decorated with newspaper clippings. The child can collect precious memories such as photographs, letters or items that remind them of the dead loved one. The child can also write down notes describing the memories that the items evoke. Other people can also write down their memories and add them to the box.

### **Making a newspaper**

The child can make a newspaper that includes photos, interviews, poems, stories and drawings. Making a newspaper is a creative way for the child to process their loss.

### **Photography**

You can give the child different tasks which the child can complete by taking pictures. Some subjects include life, death, memories, longing and different emotions. The photos can be turned into an exhibition or added to the newspaper

that the child has made.

### **My body**

Draw the child's silhouette on a canvas. The child can cut the silhouette out, and you get a life-sized paper doll. You can give the child different tasks: cut out or draw happy pictures and glue them to the body; paint the body parts where you feel joy with happy colours; paint the body parts where you feel sadness with sad colours, etc. You can also give the child colourful papers, pieces of wallpaper and wool yarn that the child can use to decorate the body and give it hair. The child may also collect names and/or pictures that the child finds important and reassuring around the paper doll.

### **Making a candle holder**

Ask the child to cut patterns out of table napkins and carefully peel off the top-most layer. Apply glue to the reverse side of the napkin, press the patterns onto an empty glass bottle and apply a coat of varnish. Once the varnish has dried, put the glass bottle into the oven (drying time and the temperature of the oven depend on the type of varnish).

Decorating store-bought candle holders with glass paint is also a pleasant way to make candle holders, which even small children can do.

### **Building a shelter**

Talk about where the child feels safe at home. It can be in the corner of the couch among pillows, in their bed under the blanket, holding a soft toy etc. After the conversation, you can build a fort with chairs, blankets and pillows.

### **Musical painting**

Play some instrumental music and give the child a large piece of paper or wallpaper and painting supplies. The child can paint whatever they want. Fingerpaint is also a good option for musical painting.

### **Emotion and strength cards**

Different cards can help the child recognise and name their emotions and strengths. Strength cards help the child understand all the different strengths we people can have. Strengths may also help in moments of grief and promote the development of the child's self-esteem. In emotion cards, emotions are depicted with different expressions, characters and images. You can ask the child to pick emotions related to a certain moment or topic, or the child can tell when they have felt that particular emotion.

There are also several books aimed at children about emotions and how to process them. You can use these books to help the child process their emotions.

## Methods for young adults:

Together with the young person, you can come up with ideas that could make it easier to live with the loss and process death.

Some examples:

- Encourage the young person to think about which things in their everyday life bring them joy (such as hobbies, fun activities, certain people) and how they could increase that joy.
- Ask if the young person is interested in creative ways of expressing themselves and their emotions. Suggest or arrange different materials for the young person, such as paint and paper for painting. Whatever the young person creates should exist primarily for the young person. You can ask them if they would like to show what they have made. However, it's important that the young person can also keep it to themselves.
- You can encourage the young person to write. A pretty notebook may help the young person to write down their emotions.
- Find and suggest relevant books and movies to the young person.
- Encourage the young person to try relaxation methods if they're interested in that. You can find alternatives online by looking up 'mindfulness', 'relaxation', 'relaxing' and 'ASMR'.
- If you know someone who has gone through a similar experience or would otherwise be suitable for supporting the grieving person, consider contacting them. For example, if you know a family where a family member has died, maybe they have a young adult who could meet the young adult you are helping.
- You can also suggest the following activities to the young person:
  - Crafting a box for memories of the dead loved one: a folder or a box to put photographs in, or other items that belonged to them: a piece of clothing or jewellery, or a drawing by them. This collection can also be digital and include photographs and screenshots of important messages from the dead loved one, for example.
  - Writing down memories of the dead loved one on a computer or in a notebook.
  - Visualising their social network: writing down important people on a paper or computer.
  - Drawing a comic of their life.

- Making a chart of important dates and ideas for celebrating them, such as birthday, Christmas, Father's Day. Maybe they can cook the dead loved one's favourite food or listen to music that they used to listen to together.



# BIBLIOGRAPHY ON CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S GRIEF

Dyregrov Atle 1993. Lapsen suru. Jyväskylä: Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy.

Dyregrov Atle & Raundalen Magne 1997. Sureva lapsi ja koulu. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Erkkilä Jaakko, Holmberg Tiina, Niemelä Sirkku & Ylönen Hilikka 2003. Surevan lapsen kanssa. Tuettu suru -projekti. Suomen Mielenterveysseura. SMS – Julkaisut. Jyväskylä: Gummerus.

Holm Tuija & Turunen Tuija 2008. Minun suruni: aikuisen opas. Psykologien kustannus Oy. Jyväskylä: Gummerus.

Holm Tuija & Turunen Tuija. 2008. Minun suruni. Surutyökirja lapsille ja varhaisnuorille. Psykologien kustannus Oy.

Kinanen Mare 2009. Surusäkki: vertaisryhmätyöskentelyä lasten sururyhmille. Helsinki: LK-kirjat.

Laimio Anne 2006. Miten kertoisin lapselle itsemurhasta? Tuettu suru -projekti. Suomen Mielenterveysseura.

Laimio Anne (toim.) 2004. Yhdessä suru on helpompi kantaa. Opas lasten ja nuorten sururyhmien ohjaajille. Tuettu suru -projekti. Suomen Mielenterveysseura. Helsinki: SMS-Tuotanto Oy.

Leppänen Anne. 2019. Surupilven salaisuus. Miten kertoa lapselle itsemurhasta. PS-kustannus (satukirja, jossa on myös ohjeita, jotka auttavat käsittelemään itsemurhaa lapsen kanssa).

Peltola Heidi & Vilppola Margareetta 2009. Luovat ja toiminnalliset menetelmät surevan lapsen tukena. Ohjaajan materiaali lasten sururyhmiin. Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulu. Sosiaali- ja terveysala. Opinnäytetyö. (Tilattavissa Nuoret Lesket ry:stä.)

Pojjula Soili 2007. Lapsi ja kriisi – selviytymisen tukeminen. Helsinki: Kirjapaja.

Suru puserossa – lapsen ja nuoren tukeminen itsemurhan jälkeen. Surunauha – itsemurhan tehneiden läheiset ry 2007. (Tilaukset: [www.surunauha.net](http://www.surunauha.net))



Uittomäki Susanna 2009. 5–10-vuotiaiden lasten sururyhmän toteuttamisen toimintamalli. Tampere: Tampereen yliopistopaino Oy – Juvenes Print.

There are several children's and young adult's books that deal with death and grief. For more books on grief, see the websites of different grief organisations. They will also provide more research on children's and young people's grief.



***For information on how to meet  
and support a grieving person, see  
[www.surevankohtaaminen.fi](http://www.surevankohtaaminen.fi)***



**NOTES AND THOUGHTS:**



