



Supporting children and young adults with a terminally ill parent.

NAVIGATING GRIEF & LOSS: PATHWAYS TO HEALING

Cancer Loss Guide for Elementary School-Age Children (5-8 years)

Prepared for Elizabeth's Smile

Written by Dakota Becker, MSW, LCSW and Catherine Swift, MSW, LCSW



For those who are navigating life after cancer loss – we are holding you in our hearts and thinking of you.



Written by experts in children's grief and development, Dakota Becker, MSW, LMSW, our Clinical Grief Consultant, and Emma Swift Lee, M.Ed., our Child and Family Development Consultant, this guide helps you navigate the death of a parent to cancer.

At Elizabeth's Smile, we believe that when children experience the death of someone close to them, that does not have to mean they have to lose their childhoods. If you're reading this, that means a child you care for is grieving the loss of someone important to them, and we can imagine you're likely grieving this loss, too. We are so glad you're here and are also so sorry for the pain you're carrying.

While children have many deeply meaningful relationships in their lives, this specific guide is written for adults who have assumed primary caretaking responsibility for a child who has lost a parent to cancer.

****Please know that we're working on writing more guides just like this one to support siblings, extended family members, teachers, and more.****

We know you're here because you deeply care for the children in your life; in fact, you care so much that you've sought out resources and support while you both grieve a painful loss. It might be hard to believe, and we want you to know that while you can't protect your child from their grief or change what happened, you are a gift to her during this time and can be for the rest of your life.

We recognize how unique each individual and family's experience of cancer and grief is, and for the purposes of this guide, we will be using the term 'cancer loss' broadly and focusing on experiences after a loved one has died. We will also be writing under the assumption that your child was aware their caregiver had cancer. We know that all families are different and communicate in different ways, so please keep in touch as we work on resources for children who did not know about their caregiver's illness, in addition to more resources on anticipatory grief, specific types of cancer-related loss, and supporting caregivers and children before their loved one dies.

If this feels hard, that is because it is hard. No one prepared you for this, and while there is no handbook on how to grieve while also caring for grieving children, we hope the information, suggestions, and ideas in this guide can offer some understanding, relief, and confidence as you and your children continue navigating life after loss.

Remember – there is no such thing as "perfect parenting," and there is no "right" way to have these hard conversations. So, if you take anything away from this introduction, please know that you already have within you what your children need – your love, care, presence, and curiosity.



With Care.

The Elizabeth's Smile Team



Welcome to our guide for elementary school-age children. Written by experts in children's grief and development, Dakota Becker, MSW, LMSW, our Clinical Grief Consultant, and Emma Swift Lee, M.Ed., our Child and Family Development Consultant, here you will find useful information about how children at this age understand and respond to death, learn how to support children at this age and how to talk to them about cancer.

As children grow and develop, their grief will grow and change with them. We encourage you to continue answering your child's questions honestly and check in on their understanding. This could sound like:

- "Tell me what you heard me say"
- "Tell me what you think that means"
- "It is okay to feel confused...am I making sense, or should I repeat myself?"

How children understand death

Children at this age naturally begin to express curiosity about death (regardless of if they've lost a parent) and may ask many "why" questions.

They are often concerned with justice and fairness. They may express feeling the death is "unfair," in some cases they may describe wanting "revenge."

Developmentally, they view the world through their eyes, meaning it is common for children at this age to believe that their thoughts/actions caused the death to occur.

By age 7, children begin to understand that death is permanent and irreversible.

How children might respond to death

Children at this age will likely have many questions, worries/fears about death, bodily safety, and health.

They may verbally share that they are "fine" or may look like "nothing is wrong" though you may see their distress in bodily aches and pains or trouble with their schoolwork/paying attention, or increased perfectionism.

Some children may appear sad or withdrawn, while others may show their distress through irritability, anger, or anxiety.

Children may also express denial that the death occurred or disbelief that it "couldn't be true"



Suggestions for supporting children at this age

Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in a language young children can understand, and then let their questions guide what else to share. Use concrete, clear, and simple language to explain death (i.e., using words such as died, body stopped working, cannot come back)

- We encourage you to **avoid** using terms that might be confusing for a young child (i.e., saying things such as “sleeping” “went away” or “resting”). Unfortunately, using words like this often inadvertently increases a child’s distress or leads to fears of sleep/separation.
- Offer accurate information to your child when they express curiosity or confusion about their parent’s death.

Gently remind your child:

- “It is so sad Dad died...Dad loved you so much and did not want to die.”
- “I know you want mom to come back...I want Mom to come back, too. But remember, when mom died and her body stopped working, that means she won’t be coming back. We can always love Mom and find ways to remember her.”
- “You will always be loved”
- “You will always be taken care of”
- “Your [parent] loved you so much and did not want to leave you”
- “We can find ways to remember [parent] and still feel connected to them”
- “You really wish [parent] was still alive. I do, too. I know that [parent] wished she could have stayed alive to be here with you, too.”



Create safety through routine → helping a child understand who will care for their day-to-day tasks (i.e., who will pick them up from school, cook their meals, and put them to sleep)

Provide outlets for children to express themselves and have developmentally appropriate control

- Can they choose their extracurricular activity
- Can they choose what chores to complete around the house

Model and explain expressions of grief, this will help your child understand that everything they're feeling is normal. So normal, in fact, that there is this little word called grief to describe the feelings they're having.

Remind and reassure children frequently that nothing they said or did caused their person to die. They are not to blame.

At this age, as children begin to socialize more with peers and navigate social conflicts, it could be helpful to explore kids' grief support groups in your area. While most children do not need individualized therapeutic support, it can be incredibly healing for kids to connect with other people their age who have shared experiences.

Talking to kids at this age about cancer

These are some of the most important ideas about cancer and loss to communicate to children this age:

- **What is cancer?**
 - *Mom was sick with something called cancer. This is a very different type of sickness than getting a cough or having a tummy ache. Cancer happens when people's bodies grow bad cells called cancer cells. Cancer cells can make people very, very sick and can even sometimes make them die.*



- **Why did they have cancer?**

- *Most of the time, no one knows why someone gets cancer. It can be hard to not know why someone gets very sick. What do you think?*

A child may wonder about this because they are worried that they or someone else they love will get sick or die.

- **Do I have cancer? Will I die? Will you die?**

- *I don't have cancer and you don't have cancer. Remember that cancer sickness is different from being sick with a cough, cold, or stomach ache – we can't catch cancer like a cold. Our bodies are healthy.*
- *Every living thing eventually dies, and you and I are healthy. We will not die for a very long time.*

- **Emphasizing that no one is to blame or at fault**

- *It's not anyone's fault that Mom had cancer. There's nothing Mom, you, or anyone else did to make it happen.*
- *It's okay if you feel upset that Mom got cancer. You may even feel angry at her for getting sick or dying. Sometimes I feel angry too. I know that she wanted to be here with you more than anything.*

- **What was done about the cancer?**

- *People take special medicine and get help from special doctors to try to get rid of these bad cells called cancer.*
- *Mom had surgery to take out as much of the cancer as possible. Surgery is when doctors use special tools to try to fix their body. Mom was sore after she had surgery, but she didn't feel any pain while the doctors were giving her surgery. That's why she had a scar/her chest looked different/her arm looked different/she couldn't play as much. It helped Mom by helping her live longer with her cancer/making her pain better, but the cancer was too big and strong, and the surgery was not able to kill all of the cancer cells in her body.*

- **Why didn't the treatment work?**

- *Even though it didn't stop the cancer, it doesn't mean it was the wrong treatment.*
- *Mom and her doctors did everything they could to help her get better. Sometimes, the cancer is stronger than even the strongest medicine or treatments they have.*
- *Lots of smart scientists and doctors are making better and stronger medicine every day. Hopefully, someday soon, there will be medicine that is stronger than any cancer.*

- **How did they die?**

- *Cancer cells can make people very, very sick by hurting their body's ability to do things like breathe, eat, or fight off other sicknesses like COVID or the flu. Sometimes, even the best medicine we have isn't strong enough to fix this.*
- *Doctors and nurses give people medicine to help them feel better even when they're very, very sick from cancer. They gave Mom medicine that helped her not have pain.*

- **Cancer that runs in families**

- *Some types of cancers are more common in some families. Mom's cancer was not one of these. Just because she had it does not mean you or anyone else will have it.*
- *Mom's cancer was one of these, but that doesn't mean anyone else in our family will definitely get sick with cancer. There are a lot of things we can all do to help keep everyone healthy, like going to the doctor for checkups every year and getting special tests.*
- *People don't get this kind of cancer until they're much older than you are. When you're a grown-up, you can get this special kind of test, too, to help keep you healthy and know what's happening inside your body.*

Addressing other hard questions

It's okay to not always have the answer. You can try saying:

- That's a really good question. I don't know the answer to that.
- What do you think?
- We can't always know what will happen, but what I do know is that you will always be safe, loved, and taken care of.



Have questions about other grief topics?

Our experts have written a series of guides that help people understand some of the core issues that are present when one grieves.

Please follow the links to learn more about these topics, ranging from [*grieving before a loss*](#) (anticipatory grief) to [*explaining to a young child that someone has died*](#), [*preparing for funerals*](#), [*understanding how to help*](#), and [*how children understand death at different developmental ages*](#).



Resources for supporting yourself

Widowed Parent → www.widowedparent.org

Videos and written resources for understanding grief and supporting yourself and your child through grief. Includes additional recommendations for books, support groups, children's grief camps, and more.

GriefShare → www.Griefshare.org

Find in-person grief support groups near you, or join online groups.

Open to Hope → www.opentohope.com

Articles, books, podcasts, and videos of professionals and other bereaved people sharing their experiences with grief.

Lotsa Helping Hands → www.lotsahelpinghands.com

One option for easily coordinating and mobilizing your support network after a loss to help with tasks like meals, child transportation, and chores.

- <https://www.empathy.com/>
 - *similar organization that supports with the logistics of grief*

Life of Dad → www.lifeofdad.com

Research shows that men tend to have fewer built-in support networks to navigate parenting and grief. This site has blog posts, videos, podcasts, and Facebook groups specifically to help support fathers.

<https://refugeingrief.com/>

<https://whatsyourgrief.com/>



Additional resources for cancer-related information

American Cancer Society

This site has a number of guides on explaining cancer to children, helping them understand death, and ways to provide support after the death of a loved one.

- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/helping-children-when-a-family-member-has-cancer/dealing-with-parents-terminal-illness/how-to-explain-to-child.html>
- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/helping-children-when-a-family-member-has-cancer/dealing-with-parents-terminal-illness/how-kids-cope-by-age.html>
- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/helping-children-when-a-family-member-has-cancer/dealing-with-parents-terminal-illness/kids-understanding-death.html>

Cancer.Net from the American Society of Clinical Oncology

(www.cancer.net)

Trusted information about all types of cancer and cancer treatment. This site provides additional information as you talk with older children and teenagers who may have more questions.



Resources for supporting kids & teens

Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families (www.dougy.org)

Expert information and resources for children of different ages and for their caregivers to help children understand and navigate grief. Explore activities for kids of each age group.

National Alliance for Children's Grief (www.nacg.org)

Comprehensive resources for understanding children's grief, talking with children about grief, and finding local and online support.

- <https://indd.adobe.com/view/246ac201-44b2-4dd2-b7cb-b53c2094b64b>
- <https://indd.adobe.com/view/e66b0d18-90f8-4edc-a046-e1cd1b3bd859>

Sesame Street Workshop

Storybooks, information guides, activities, and videos to help children learn how to cope with grief.

- www.sesameworkshop.org/topics/grief/

Camp Kesem

Week-long camps held around the country for kids affected by a parent's cancer.

- www.kesem.org

Empower

Mentoring programs pairing grieving children with adults who lost a parent as a child, in order to empower and support them on their grief journey.

- <https://weareempower.org/>



Kids books about grief

While grief often occurs in different forms before someone dies, these books are intended to support children and their families after a loss has already occurred.

[Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death](#)

[A Kids Book About Death by Taryn Schuelke](#)

[Why Do I Feel So Sad?: A Grief Book for Children](#)

[What Does Grief Feel Like?: Leigh, Korie, Malbrough, Mike: 9781631987069: Amazon.com: Books](#)

[When Someone Dies: A Children's Mindful How-To Guide on Grief and Loss](#)

[One Wave at a Time: A Story about Grief and Healing](#)

[I Miss You: Grief and Mental Health Books for Kids \(A First Look at...Series\)](#)



Finding Grief Support for Kids & Teens Near You

<https://elunanetwork.org/>

<https://nacg.org/find-support/>

<https://www.dougy.org/program-finder>



Citations

https://cancerca.org/publications/66-helping_teenagers_who_have_lost_a_parent

https://cancerca.org/publications/52-helping_children_who_have_lost_a_loved_one

<https://judishouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Commongriefreactions-2023.pdf>

<https://judishouse.org/resources/common-grief-reactions/>

<https://judishouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Developmental-Differences-in-Understanding-and-Reacting-to-Death-1.pdf>

<https://www.dana-farber.org/patient-family/support-services/family-connections/for-patients/talking-children-about-cancer>

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/helping-toddlers-cope-with-grief-and-death/>

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx

<https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief/>

<https://www.annafreud.org/resources/under-fives-wellbeing/common-difficulties/bereavement/>