

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN GRIEF

An Age-Based Guide for Parents and Caregivers



HOSPICE
OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



Grief

Grief is the natural, normal and healthy response to loss.

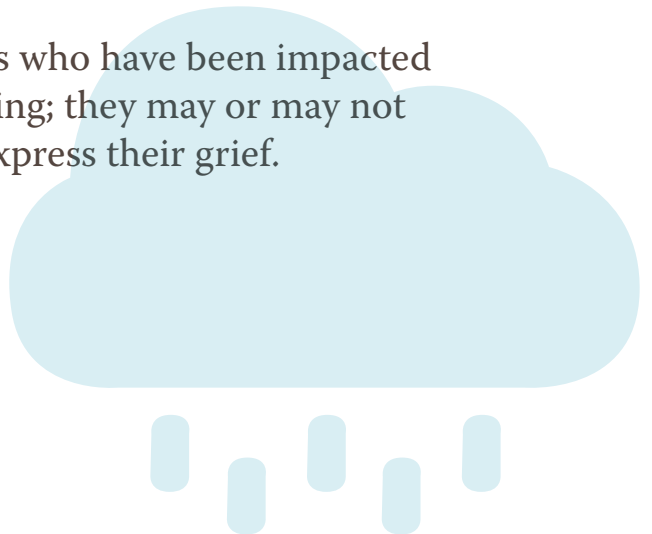
Each person's grief experience is unique.

There are no "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve.

Every death is different and will be experienced in different ways.

Grieving is not something to get over.

All children and teens who have been impacted by a death are grieving; they may or may not outwardly express their grief.





Contents

Introduction	4
Helping Youth Work Through Grief.	5
Talking with Grieving Children and Teens	7
Developmental Grief Reactions	8
Newborn – 2 Years	9
2 Years – 5 Years	10
6 Years – 9 Years	13
10 Years – 12 Years	15
13 Years – 18 Years.	17
Warning Signs: When to Seek Professional Help.	19
Funerals, Memorials and Other Rituals	20
Additional Support.	21

Introduction

When someone in a child's life dies, it can be a challenging and stressful family time. The rhythms of life have changed, and everyone is trying to adapt to the loss. As a parent or guardian of a grieving child or teen, you face the enormous task of helping them cope with the death of a loved one, while you are also grieving. You may feel unprepared for this work, but with support and your own awareness you can help guide your child, or a child you're caring for, through their grief.

Remember, while you are trying to help kids work through grief, you also need time to grieve in your own way. Take time to sort out your own needs and emotions. Accept the help of family and friends. Allow yourself to express your own feelings of grief, understanding that this is a natural part of the healing process.

This booklet has been designed as a general guide to help you recognize and understand youth grief reactions, and to offer guidance and support as you work through this trying time. Be patient with the grieving process in your child and in yourself. There are no set formulas or rules for grieving and healing. Do the best you can. Your caring presence and calm guidance will go a long way toward making your child's loss more bearable.



Helping Youth Work Through Grief

After a loss, kids can feel sad, lonely, confused and angry, just as adults do. They may have difficulty concentrating, feel differently around their friends and have less energy. Unlike adults, children and teens lack the skills for coping with, and sometimes expressing, what they're going through. Here are some general ways that you can help:

Provide a safe and caring environment. Let them know that you care, understand and want to help them through this hard time. It is a time when listening, caring and sharing can provide much needed comfort for all.

Maintain routines as much as possible. It is helpful to have children remain in a familiar place (their home and room) and with familiar people.

Give them your attention. Telling stories, reading books, drawing pictures and just being with each other create opportunities for healing.

Be available to listen. Really listen to what children are saying or asking. Help them make sense of their confusion. To understand what they are expressing you may need to ask further questions. Listen with respect and care. It is okay to not have all of the answers all of the time.

Help give their loss a voice. Research has shown that children who have experienced the death of a parent are most healthy and well adjusted if they are allowed to have open communication in the home about the parent who died. Help your children discuss what happened and why. Be the safe person to whom your children turn to ask the unmentionable. Give them opportunities for expression.

Allow them to express thoughts and feelings in whatever way necessary – including acting out or withdrawing. Anger, fear and sadness are all natural feelings when one has experienced a loss. Allow and encourage your children to express their grief and be available to talk, to listen and to answer questions as the need arises. Don't try to distract them from the loss by keeping them busy with activities. They need to experience their feelings in order to move through their grief. Know that expressing grief helps kids learn healthy coping skills.

Provide for creative expression. Children who do not openly display their grief will often reveal it through play. Play provides an opportunity for them to express sadness, anxiety and distress in a comfortable and familiar way, which greatly contributes to their healing. Make sure they have plenty of paper, markers and other art materials on hand. Help them create special books where they can write letters to their loved one and share their feelings, memories and accomplishments as they continue to grow.

Help them to keep the memory of their loved one alive. Help your children identify tangible things that hold special meaning. You might not be aware of how significant an old birthday gift or a feather gathering dust on the bookshelf might be. Sharing the stories behind these items can help keep memories alive for your kids and will create opportunities for healing. They may want to wear mementos or keep them in their pockets or backpacks. They may want to choose a special photograph to keep in their room.

Prepare them for anniversary dates and other special days such as birthdays, graduations and holidays. Try to anticipate these times and talk with your children in advance to help prepare them. Help them create special rituals to honor the one who has died. You might plant a tree in a special spot, light candles or visit favorite places – anything that has meaning for you and your children.

Let others help. Let family and friends take the kids for a few hours. Find a support group where your child can be with other kids who are also grieving. Know when to seek professional help (see page 19).



Talking with Grieving Children and Teens

Experts agree that it is best for parents and caregivers to explain death to children in simple, age appropriate terms. Children should be told as soon as possible that the death has occurred. It is important that they be told how the loved one died, using words that are clear, factual and understandable. We naturally want to soften the impact of the death for children, yet words like “sleeping peacefully” or “passed away” should be avoided. Instead use words like “dead” and “died.”



Answer questions as soon as they surface, without going into more detail than your children are capable of processing. Children do not need all of the information at one time. Encourage them to ask questions.

Don't be afraid to share your emotions with your children as you tell them. This teaches them that crying and deep sadness are normal and natural ways to express strong feelings. Tell your children how you feel and why you are sad and upset over the loss. Putting your own feelings into words also helps to reduce any confusion they may have about your behavior. Letting children know when you feel angry, sad, happy or frustrated is a wonderful model for them.

When speaking about death and grieving to your children, honesty is always the best approach. Kids want information, but it must be truthful. Talking about what happened, with as many details as your kids need, can help them begin to manage the feelings behind their troubling, confusing or fearful thoughts. Talking about the unmentionable is powerful and provides relief; not talking about it isolates them and keeps them stuck in the mourning process. Children need warm, caring, sensitive adults willing to speak to whatever issues they have. Follow your heart, not your fear.



Developmental Grief Reactions

All children mourn for loved ones who have died. The following factors will affect a child's reaction to death:

- How the person died
- How the child learned about the death
- The child's relationship to the one who died
- The changes in the child's family after the death
- How and whether the child's needs are met during the rituals following the death
- The child's coping abilities before the death
- The child's age and developmental stage

Children don't usually tell you that they are grieving, and they may not know themselves, but you can usually tell by what they say or do.

As children age, and their brains develop, their inner experience and the outward expression of grief change. What follows are typical grief reactions for different age groups and suggestions for ways that you can be most helpful in supporting them. Remember, the behaviors children exhibit after a death are coping mechanisms and are expected responses. It is very easy to misunderstand the grief reactions of a child, especially when you are carrying your own burden of grief. However, with your empathy, reassurance and calm guidance, the behaviors and reactions are likely to subside.

Note: These are general guides. The reactions of different age groups tend to overlap.

Newborn – 2 Years

Many people believe that because babies are not old enough to understand death, they don't grieve. The truth is, everyone grieves. While infants may not be able to comprehend the meaning of what is happening around them, they *will* sense the changes. So as you grieve the death of someone you love, your baby notices. Maybe you are quieter; maybe you don't feel up to playing; maybe others are filling in and they do things differently. These small changes are noticeable and significant to babies. Life as they knew it has changed, and things may not feel as safe and comforting. There is a loss, and they grieve.

TYPICAL GRIEF RESPONSES:

Newborn – 10 months:

- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in eating patterns
- Changes in bladder & bowel patterns
- Harder to soothe
- Less playful
- Less responsive

10 months – 2 years:

- Fussiness
- Angry outbursts & temper tantrums
- Searching for the lost loved one
- Loss of interest in toys & activities
- Loss of interest in food
- Thumb sucking
- Curling up in fetal position

0-2

WHAT THEY NEED:

Familiar routines. Keep things as normal as you can. Keep feeding times, play times, story times, singing and holding times all the same. Keep other household routines on schedule as much as possible.

Love, security and a stable environment. Offer your warmth, your love and quiet time. Protect them from too many strange voices, faces, sounds and scents. Hold them and comfort them. Spend as much time with them as you can.

Simple communication. To help babies 18 – 24 months old understand the loss and changes in the home, repeat simple sentences: “Grandpa gone.” If they express concern about the sadness they see around them, gently explain that, “A sad thing happened.” Say that “People feel sad, but they will feel better after a while.” All you really need to do is acknowledge their awareness of sadness. You might reflect their words back to them. In response to “Mommy is sad,” say “Yes. Mommy is sad.” Sometimes that is all they need.

2 Years – 5 Years

Children in this age group see death as temporary and believe that the person will return or can be visited. They have difficulty with concepts such as heaven, the soul or the spirit. Most importantly, they interpret their world in very literal ways. Anything you say is likely to be taken as very real. So take special care to base your explanations on simple facts. It is natural to try to soften things for young children, but vague explanations or indirect language like, “Grandma is resting peacefully now”, will tend to create confusion and could possibly increase your child’s anxiety and fear. Two- to five-year-olds feel loss and experience strong emotions following the death of a loved one.

THEY OFTEN FEEL:

Sad
Anxious
Cranky
Confused
Scared
Angry

TYPICAL GRIEF RESPONSES:

Crying
Fighting
Interest in dead things
Asking questions over and over
Acting as if the death never happened
Clinging excessively
Regression: wetting the bed, sucking their thumbs and other infantile behaviors
Fear of sleeping and dying
Separation anxiety

WHAT THEY NEED:

Like younger children, they need your love, attention, familiar routines and structure. They also need:

To be told as soon as possible about the death. Go to a quiet place and hold your child in your arms. Your touch and physical warmth will provide a sense of security and trust. Speak in a calm, reassuring, matter-of-fact voice about what has happened. Talking about what will happen next can also help your child feel more secure about the future.

To be taught about death. Use language that is simple, sensitive and direct. Define death as the fact that the body has totally stopped. Explain that a person or an animal that is dead can't walk, breathe, or feel anymore. Children at this age need to know that death is nothing like sleeping. Clearly and specifically state that death is NOT a form of sleeping; the body will NOT wake up.

Then, provide a clear explanation of what happened. Here are some examples of how to talk about the death:

“Grandpa died this morning. His body was broken, and the doctors were not able to fix it.”

“We have something very sad to tell you. Daddy was hurt very badly, and his body doesn't work anymore. Daddy has died and will not be coming back. We will miss him very much. I love you, and I will take care of you.”

If asked how the person died, use lots of “very's”:

“He was very, very, very, old” or “very, very, very sick.” “Death only happens to people who are very, very, very, very sick with diseases that very few people get.”

Lots of reassurance that you will care for them as you always have. They may worry that other loved ones will die too. Reassure them by talking about the things you do to keep yourself healthy.

Validation of their feelings. Tell your child often that it is okay to cry and feel sad or upset. Share your own feelings and don't be afraid to cry in front of your child.

Opportunities to play out their feelings and emotions. Provide lots of time and materials for creative and physical play. Children this age work best with crayons, paints, markers and paper, clay, blocks, puppets and dolls. Playing “funeral” or “hospital,” drawing a person in a coffin, or painting what happens after someone dies are all ways children attempt to understand and to work through a confusing situation.

Fun time. Resume play dates and other forms of social interaction with their peers as soon as possible.

Honest and simple answers to their questions. They will try to make sense of the loss. Since their ability to retain information is still developing, they may need to be told things over and over. Sometimes children in this age range will ask questions repeatedly as they try to make sense of it all. Here are some suggestions for answering common questions adapted from “How Do We Tell the Children,” by Dan Schafer:

What does dead mean?

“He is not breathing anymore. His heart is not working. He cannot eat, sleep, move, or feel anymore. He is dead.”

Why can't they fix him?

“Once the body stops working, it can't start again.”

Is he sleeping?

“No. When we sleep, our body is just resting, and it is still working.”

Does he still hurt?

“No, Grandpa does not hurt anymore. He does not feel, move, or hurt. His body does not do anything like it did before.”

Where is Grandpa now?

First, you may want to ask, “Where do you think Grandpa is?” Depending on the answer you may have to remind your child about the burial or cremation, or you may use this as an opportunity to talk about your spiritual beliefs. Be very concrete in your explanations.

When is Grandpa coming back?

“Grandpa will not be coming back. When people die they do not come back. Death is forever. We will always remember him, though.”

Did I make Grandpa die?

“No, nothing that you did or said or thought made Grandpa die. He loved you very, very much.”

Will you die too?

“I will die some day, but I hope to be here to love you and watch you grow up. Most people live to be very, very, very old.”

Will I die?

“Yes, someday you will die. I hope that you will live a very, very long time, though.”

6 Years - 9 Years

Children in this age group cope by understanding. They want to know what happened. They want to know what will stay the same and what will change. They wonder if they will have to change schools, change friends or leave the family home. They are full of fear and questions. They are often very curious about the functions of dead bodies and have a desire for complete details. Information helps them to feel safe.

Although children this age have strong feelings of loss after a loved one dies, they often have difficulty showing their feelings. Some of their feelings may be unfamiliar and extremely uncomfortable to experience, which can be very overwhelming. As a result, children may try to ignore their feelings or bury them deep inside. They may grieve in spurts – alternately approaching and then avoiding feelings, to soften the impact. Or they may build a wall against the painful feelings and act like nothing has happened.

THEY OFTEN FEEL:

- Sad
- Anxious
- Withdrawn
- Confused
- Scared
- Vulnerable
- Angry
- Guilty

TYPICAL GRIEF RESPONSES:

- Denial
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Nightmares
- Acting as if death didn't happen
- Lack of concentration
- Decline in school grades
- Physical ailments
- Caretaking – of younger siblings or taking on chores of the deceased
- Fear of being abandoned

If a parent has died, children this age may also fear for the survival of the remaining parent and may be reluctant to leave the parent's side, worry about his or her health, and refuse to go to school.

WHAT THEY NEED:

Like younger children, they need your love, attention, familiar routines and structure. They also need:

Simple, honest, accurate information. Explain the death in a sensitive but factual way. Be prepared to answer questions and address concerns in an honest and comforting way. It's okay to say, "I don't know."

Time to talk with you. Find time to quietly speak with your children about their fears and worries. Focus on listening rather than advising. Let them speak freely, in a safe place without interruptions, about the death of their loved one and their feelings of loss. As your child begins to feel safer and more comfortable talking with you about death, you will find that fears, anxieties, sadness and confusion will gradually diminish.

Reassurance that the death was not caused by anything they did, thought or said. As kids begin to think abstractly, they begin to wonder about cause and effect. They may question why someone died and what they might have done differently. They can feel guilty and responsible.

Outlets for grief. Be especially alert to your kids' emotional reactions. Let them know that what they are feeling is normal after a death, and that you are also having those feelings. Offer the opportunity for them to play out those feelings through creative activities. Have clay and chalk and other art materials on hand. Offer opportunities for fantasy play through puppets and make-believe. Allow and encourage expression of feelings through physical outlets. Classes in karate or dance can also help boost their self-esteem during this difficult time.

Fun time. Encourage them to spend time with their peers. Let them know it is still okay to have fun.



10 Years – 12 Years

Although kids this age experience deep feelings of sadness following a death, they try with all their might to present a strong exterior and remain above the emotional pain. Letting their emotions out might tear their safe world apart, so they try to maintain control of their world by not dealing with their feelings. They also fear that expressing their grief might be seen as a sign of weakness. Boys especially may refuse to cry or show emotion, as this makes them appear vulnerable. They may deny that the death has changed their lives and insist that they “don’t feel anything” or “don’t care.” Since their feelings have nowhere to go, they might then exhibit uncharacteristic or even violent behavior.

Preadolescent children often try to make sense of the death and try to come up with reasons to help them understand. They wonder what they might have done, or failed to do, to cause the death. Unlike younger kids, however, they may not talk about these thoughts. They also may not ask questions about the cause of death and may pretend they understand when they really don’t.

Fearing that everything will fall apart, preadolescents try to keep it together. They may have fears of their own mortality, losing someone else and being abandoned as they move into adolescence. They don’t usually talk about these fears. Unexpressed fear may surface as physical complaints, moodiness, sleep difficulties, eating problems and a lack of interest in attending school.

10-12

THEY OFTEN FEEL:

Angry
Guilty
Sad
Anxious
Withdrawn
Confused
Scared
Vulnerable
Lonely

TYPICAL GRIEF RESPONSES:

Aggression
Withdrawal
Talking about physical aspects of death
Acting as if death didn’t happen
Physical ailments
Nightmares
Caretaking – of younger siblings or taking on chores of the deceased
Lack of concentration

WHAT THEY NEED:

Like younger children, they need your love, attention, familiar routines and structure. They also need:

Reassurance & predictability. Invite your children to share their concerns about the future. Answer questions as openly and honestly as you can. Explain that although the family has changed, you are still there to take care of them.

Time to talk with you. Give them time to talk about the death and express their deep inner feelings. Share your feelings with them. Explain how fear, worry, anger, frustration and pain are all normal feelings at a time of crisis and loss. Take special care to acknowledge their grief and to address their fears. Ask questions so that you have the opportunity to provide factual information. For example, “Is there anything about Grandpa’s death that worries you?”

Alone time. Acknowledge and encourage their need for alone time. You might suggest that they write about their feelings or make a list of the things they are worried about. Writing a letter to the one who died is also very healing.

Afterward, you can invite them to share their writings with you, if they choose.

Permission to be angry. Be patient when grief is expressed as anger. Continue to offer your love, understanding, and support. You may find it helpful to explain that anger is the body’s way of getting ready for a fight when a person feels threatened, and that “angry energy” builds up and needs a place to go. Allow and encourage venting of that energy through sports and other safe physical outlets. Screaming into pillows and ripping up old magazines are also safe ways to release emotions.

Outlets for expression of grief. Encourage self-expression through art, music and writing. Encourage them to join a support group, where they can be with other kids who are grieving.

13 Years – 18 Years

Death is likely to intensify the pressure that teenagers are already feeling as they face the future and its many unknowns. When teens are confronted with the death of someone close, they may become even more vulnerable, and common adolescent issues and behaviors can be magnified. They may act out their grief by increased risk taking like cutting school, drinking, driving dangerously, etc. Teens usually grieve through their actions. They may slam doors, argue, scream, fight, isolate themselves and evade responsibilities.

Teenagers can have powerful emotions. Their reactions may vary widely and change abruptly, from fear to anger, shock, guilt, denial and regression to childlike thinking. They may seek the support of their friends rather than family because dealing with the grief of a close family member is often too overwhelming. They may want their parents to be available to them, but they are likely to want to grieve with their friends. It is helpful for adults to respect their need to grieve in their own way.

Some teens cope by not talking about the death, spending long periods of time with friends, hanging out in their rooms and listening to music or sleeping. Some may drift off into a depressed state, withdrawing from friends and family members, isolating themselves and spiraling downward into their dark thoughts.

THEY OFTEN FEEL:

Angry
Guilty
Sad
Anxious
Withdrawn
Confused
Scared
Vulnerable
Isolated
Numb

TYPICAL GRIEF RESPONSES:

Aggression, possessiveness, phobias
Physical ailments
Impulsive behavior
Slamming doors, arguing, screaming, fighting
Isolation
Evasion of responsibilities
Risk taking
Acting as if death didn't happen
Lack of concentration
Decline in school grades

WHAT THEY NEED:

Like younger children, they need your love, attention, familiar routines and structure. They also need:

Open and honest discussion of feelings. Acknowledge that there are many ways to grieve. Styles and timing differences should be accepted. Do not attempt to take grief away. They need to know that you will be truthful with them and that they can trust you. Tell them that the intense feelings of grief don't go on forever and that they won't destroy us. Teens often have not learned this yet and find it helpful to be reassured.

Listening without judging. Teens need support, and they need to feel heard. This may allow them to be more in touch with their softer feelings and to express them which will decrease their anger. We need to listen to their thoughts in order to enhance their sense of mastery, purpose and dignity in life. They need us to listen carefully so that they can cope with and resolve any difficulty they perceive. Respect their privacy.

Sense of control. Do not take control. Include them in decision making. Ease expectations for school performance and give them permission to take a lighter load.

Time with their friends. Encourage them to maintain their regular patterns of sleeping, eating and socializing as much as possible and to return to their normal schedule as soon as they can. A quick return to their peer group is essential for adolescents who are feeling “different” because of the death.

Outlets for expression of grief. Encourage self-expression through art, music and writing. Encourage them to talk with someone about their feelings (if not you, another adult they respect and trust). A peer support group could help. Be alert to signs of serious depression. Don't hesitate to seek professional help.



Warning Signs: When to Seek Professional Help

Children may demonstrate many of the common grief reactions for weeks or even months after a death.

You may become concerned by your child's unusual behavior.

Ask yourself the following questions to help determine if a problem exists:

- Has the behavior lasted an exceptionally long period of time?
- Is the behavior extremely intense?
- Does the behavior interfere with anyone's safety?
- Is the behavior seriously interrupting the child's development?

"Yes" answers may indicate that your child is stuck in the grief process. Seek the help of a qualified mental health professional.

Contact a mental health professional immediately if your child or teen exhibits:

- Threats of suicide
- Previous suicide attempts
- Prolonged depression
- Irregular eating and/or sleeping habits
- Loss of interest in life, school or job
- Giving away possessions or making final arrangements



Funerals, Memorials and Other Rituals

Including your children in the planning of funerals and memorials can be extremely healing for them. You can ask them to help choose the music or assist you in choosing a photograph. You can invite them to prepare something to say and perhaps to write a poem, draw a picture or choose a special item to place in the casket. These are all good ways to help them feel included.

Give your children the choice to attend the funeral or memorial after you explain, in detail, what will take place. If they understand what is happening and want to attend the funeral and burial, let them. Tell them exactly what will happen and why, and encourage questions. Don't forget to let them know about special rituals. For example, explaining as they walk up to the casket that this will be the last time they will see the body is important.

Saying goodbye is important for children, as it helps them accept the reality of the death. You can continue to help your children say goodbye long after the funeral or memorial. They may wish to decorate the grave with flowers or help choose a tree to be planted. Keeping mementos of their loved one in their room, or in a special place in the house, can also be very helpful. Rituals, such as lighting a special candle, creating a scrapbook or showing a video, can help to ease the inevitable pain experienced at birthdays, holidays and other important dates throughout the year. Plan times to honor and talk about your loved one.

Reassure your children that although a loved one has died and is no longer with them, he or she still remains in their hearts and in their memories.

Additional Support

There have been many wonderful books written for grieving children and their caregivers. You can find them at your local libraries, bookstores and online. Here is a sampling of our favorites:

Ingpen, R. & Mellonie, B. *Lifetimes*. This best selling classic uses nature to explain to children that dying is as much a part of living as being born.

Brown, M. & Kramsny-Brown, L. *When Dinosaurs Die*. This is an informative comforting book that allows adults to enter into the world of a child to explain death.

Karst, Patrice. *The Invisible String*. This picture book has a reassuring message that, despite separation and loss, we always have a connection to the ones we love.

National Alliance for Grieving Children. *When Someone Dies: A Child-Caregiver Activity Book*. This activity book offers activities and guidance to parents/caregivers regarding death, dying, and bereavement.

Heegaard, Marge. *When Someone Very Special Dies, Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief*. An activity book designed for children ages 6-12.

Schwibert, Pat and Chuck DeKlyen. *Tear Soup*. A story book for older children, teens, and adults on coping and healing after a loss.

The Dougy Center. *Deconstruction/Reconstruction: A Grief Journal*. This journal is appropriate for teens.

Websites:

The Moyer Foundation
www.moyerfoundation.org

National Alliance for Grieving Children
www.childrengrieve.org

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

Coalition to Support Grieving Students
www.grievingstudents.org

Compassion Books: Resources on Loss and Grief
www.compassionbooks.com

Centering Corporation and Grief Digest Magazine
www.centering.org

About Us

HOSPICE OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY is the county's oldest nonprofit hospice. Our goal is to provide compassionate, professional care and support for individuals and their families so they may live as fully and comfortably as possible. We are honored to serve our community throughout Santa Cruz and northern Monterey counties.

At Hospice of Santa Cruz County, we accept grief as a normal response to the loss of a loved one. We provide nurturing support for Hospice families and anyone in our community who has experienced the death of a loved one.

For more information about grief support or any of our services, call 831.430.3000 or visit our website at hospicesantacruz.org. Let us share the many ways we can help.





Fun, Healing and Support for Grieving Children and Teens

Camp Erin Santa Cruz is a free bereavement camp for youth grieving the significant death of a person in their lives. Children and teens ages 6-17 attend a weekend camp experience that combines grief education and emotional support with fun, traditional camp activities.

Led by bereavement professionals and caring volunteers, campers are provided a safe environment to explore their grief, learn essential coping skills, and make friends with peers who are also grieving.

Camp Erin Santa Cruz is part of Eluna's national Camp Erin network.

 hospicesantacruz.org  **831.430.3090**  camperin@hospicesantacruz.org



Serving Our Community from Two Locations:

**The Mary & Richard Solari Center
for Compassionate Care**
940 Disc Drive
Scotts Valley CA 95066

**The Borina Family Center
for Compassionate Care**
65 Nielson Street, Suite 121
Watsonville CA 95076



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