Basic Needs of Grieving Teens
Adapted from: Helping Teens Cope with Death (2004) by The Dougy Center for Grieving Children

Truth
Truth heals and promotes a healthy grieving process. Grievers appreciate truthful disclosure about all information relating to the person who died, the circumstances and potential changes that will affect them.

Assurances
Grieving teens want to feel certain that their parent or caregiver is healthy, balanced and in control. Parents should feel free to express emotions, but need to find adult support rather than depend upon the teen for support.

Boundaries
Young grievers need to know that adults care enough to set loving, specific limitations on their behavior. Reasonable and consistent boundaries provide safety and support teens during a period of disorienting change.

Choices
Teens are empowered when they are given choices and options. In the face of death, teens often feel powerless and out of control. Providing the teen with informed choices and accepting their decisions can help them regain a sense of balance, and show that you respect their decision-making abilities.

Food & Water
Grief work uses and depletes energy. Healthy, nutritious food provides fuel, so have it available in large quantities. Plan eating times that are comfortable and relaxed. Grievers also often experience dehydration. Water is a forgotten healer. Offer healthy liquids to teens who are grieving.

Listeners
Private grieving becomes public mourning when a teen finds an accepting listener in whom to confide. A safe listener can have a profound influence on the life of a young person who is grieving.

Models
Teens watch the adults in their lives to learn how (or how not) to grieve and mourn. Adults who abuse alcohol or other drugs, who refuse to display any emotions, or who run from their grief in other ways are poor models for a healthy grieving process.

Privacy
Much of grieving is a private process, including reflection, contemplation, communication, evaluation, emotion, determination and memorialization. Remember to respect the privacy of grieving teens.

Recreation
Grievers need time to have fun. Either with friends or alone, recreation can be a means of grieving or can provide a much needed break from the serious work of grieving.

Routines
Routines, such as regular bed times, meals and chores, provide a safe, predictable environment for teens. Routines allow teens consistency; they do not have to constantly worry about what will happen next.

Sleep
Grieving can cause fatigue. Grief work demands rest. Try to ensure that your teen gets enough sleep.
Children's Understanding of Death - Developmental Stages

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

Many (adults) question how much children really do understand about death. There are three components involved in a complete understanding of the concept of death:

- **Nonfunctionality** - the fact that once something dies, all physical functions cease
- **Irreversibility** - something that has died cannot come back to life
- **Universality** - all living things will eventually die

The understanding of each of these components varies with each child, based on their own personal experience with death. Outlined below are general guidelines for children's understanding of the concept of death.

**Ages 2-4**
- **Nonfunctionality**: Children of this age tend to think that all things that can move are alive.
- **Irreversibility**: Children of this age believe that something that is "dead" can come back to life (i.e., cartoons enforce this).
- **Universality**: Children of this age, in their egocentric view of the world, believe that they will never die. In fact, the fact that they could die is not a concept that would enter their minds (unless they've experienced the death of someone close to them who is the same age).

**Ages 5-8**
- **Nonfunctionality**: This is the age where children begin to understand that when something dies, the physical functions cease.
- **Irreversibility**: Children of this age begin to understand that once something dies, it cannot come back to life (especially true for plants, animals, and insects).
- **Universality**: Children still don't take death personally - they perceive that it only happens to "old" or "sick" people.

**Ages 9-10+**
By ages 9 or 10, children begin to have a complete understanding of all three components which leads to a mature understanding of the concept of death.

It is very important to realize that although a very young child may not fully understand what it means when someone dies, it does not discount the fact that they will grieve the very real loss and change they are experiencing in their lives.
Explaining Cremation to Children
By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

The concept of cremation may be scary for some children. They may have heard adults use words such as "oven" and "burn", or may picture in their minds that cremation is like setting the person's body on fire. It is important to use simple, concrete language, and avoid using words that may frighten children when talking about cremation.

First, it is important to emphasize that when someone dies, what's left is just their body -- the part of the person that made them special is no longer there. They cannot see, hear, think, talk, breathe, or FEEL anything anymore. After someone dies, the family calls the funeral home to help them care for the body. There are three ways to care for the body after a person dies: burial, cremation, or donation to a medical school for learning or research. Whether the body is buried or cremated, the end result is the same: the body reduces to "ashes" – or, only the bones remain.

Following is a suggestion on how to explain the cremation process to a child:

The person's body is placed into a special box and then into a room (or chamber), called a crematory, where it gets very, very hot. The heat helps to change the person's body into cremated remains (or "ashes") very quickly. It usually takes about 2 to 3 hours. [When a person's body is buried, it takes many many years for the body to change to "ashes".] After the cremation is finished, all that is left are pieces of the bones. There are tiny pieces as well as large pieces. The bone pieces are then placed into a special machine called a processor, which breaks up the bones until they are like powder. The powder is gray in color – the color of our bones. The cremated remains are then placed into a container or urn which the family has chosen to use. The cremated remains of an adult weigh about 5 or 6 pounds. The cremated remains of a baby weigh just a few ounces. Sometimes the family keeps the cremated remains at their house in a pretty container, or they might bury them in a cemetery. Sometimes the cremated remains are sprinkled or scattered in an outdoor place that is special to the family or to the person who died.
How to Help Teenagers Cope with Grief
By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

Writing/Journaling
Having a teen keep a journal of his/her thoughts and feelings in the aftermath of a death is a wonderful tool for expression. Some teens benefit from writing a letter to the person who died in order to release their grief feelings.

Reading
Books written specifically for teens can be very helpful in validating and normalizing a teen’s grief feelings.

Music
Music is a powerful form of communicating, especially for teenagers. Not only can music be an excellent vehicle for bringing feelings and memories to the surface, but it also provides a way to help teens relax. Teenagers can be asked to share music that reminds them of the person who died or a favorite song that that person liked. If they play a musical instrument, they can bring it to play the musical selection. The following music may be highly effective with teenagers:
- “I Can Only Imagine”-MercyMe
- “I Miss You”-Avril Lavigne
- “Over You”-Miranda Lambert
- “Paradise”–Coldplay
- “When I Get Where I’m Going”-Brad Paisley
- “See You Again”–Wiz Khalifa ft. Charlie Puth

Visible Memorials
An extremely important mode of grief expression for teens is through visible memorials. This may take the form of posters, murals, Facebook pages, items left at the place of death or interment, etc. Teens should be given ample opportunity to express themselves and honor their special person in this way, with the understanding that this need may continue for some time.

Keepsakes
Some teenagers cherish items that belonged to the person who died. It is not unusual for them to save clothing, jewelry, toys, locks of hair, photos and other personal items. Such “linking objects” help teens remember the person who died and honor the life that was lived.

Rituals
Teenagers MUST be given the opportunity to honor their special person through ritual. This may take the form of an actual memorial service or ceremony, a tree planting, some type of dedication, or perhaps visiting the place of interment. If it is a classmate who has died, incorporate grieving-friends doing something together to honor their friend’s life-can be very healing. In addition, perhaps it would be meaningful for the surviving friends to do something special at graduation or at a sporting event.

Key Considerations
All too often, adults are negatively influenced by the cause of death, particularly if the death was suicide or alcohol/drug-related. It is extremely unhealthy for teens to be denied adequate outlets for their grief based on how or why the person died. The bottom line is: someone special to them has died - regardless of the circumstances of the death. Adults (i.e., parents, school personnel, etc.) who disallow memorialization because it is a suicide for example, are creating an environment of frustration and hostility for the surviving friends. These survivors are left to feel as if they are being punished for their friend’s decision. Furthermore, it is, in effect, denying the life of that person who died! One of the most important things we can teach teenagers is how to honor life.
How We Can Be Effective Helpers of Grieving Children
Adapted from Wass & Corr, 1984, Helping Children Cope with Death

- We must be in the process of personal confrontation with death. From time to time we need to reflect upon and clarify our concepts, beliefs and attitudes about death. We must acknowledge our own mortality and not be uncomfortable talking about it.

- We must perceive the child as a human being of worth and uniqueness.

- The child may look up to us for help, but we must be careful not to look down when giving it.

- We need to truly attempt to understand what the child is trying to tell us verbally, through body language and behavior.

- Have respect for the child’s uniqueness.

- Try to see things and events from the child’s perspective. We often answer questions children do not ask and fail to answer those they do.

- The child needs to feel psychologically safe and non-threatened. We should try to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust as well as open communication. This helps to encourage children to inquire and share their fears and concerns without fear of rejection.

- Honesty is key, and only strengthens the child’s trust. This includes admission of ignorance if necessary.
Top 10 List for Helping Grieving Children & Teens

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

10. Get rid of assumptions and let the child or teen TEACH you about their grief

9. Deal with the FACTS
By clearly communicating the facts of a death you can help prepare a child or teen for the pain of grief by minimizing the additional pain and confusion that occur when facts aren’t communicated clearly or on purpose. Keep the facts consistent, clear and truthful.

8. Be Honest
Do not lie to children or teens. Trust is the essential element in all human relationships. The trust of a child is trust in its most sacred form.

7. Help with “connecting the dots”
Coach children and teens to continue to be true to who they are. Help them see how they can “take their grief with them” to their favorite activities and hobbies and even use those activities as an effective means for grief expression.

6. Encourage memorialization and ritual
Children and teens often have the best ideas for rituals – explore ideas together.

5. Connect with community (grief) resources
Peer support can be very healing for grieving children and teens as they realize that they aren’t alone in what they are experiencing.

4. Identify Secondary Losses
Secondary losses can be past, present or future. They can be physical, relational or material. Identifying secondary losses helps give children and teens “permission” to feel their pain as they realize how far-reaching their grief really is.

3. Validate feelings – especially anger
Many children believe there are wrong feelings. Validate any and all feelings and distinguish between feelings and behavior. Talk about the importance of expressing feelings and distinguish between the good ways and the bad ways of grief expression.

2. Model and teach how to honor life
There are two ways we honor someone special who has died:

• The things we do to show honor (lighting a candle, speaking their name, sharing memories, making a donation, visiting a place of memory, etc.)
• The way we choose to continue to live our lives

1. LISTEN
Top 10 List for Helping Those Who Are Grieving

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

- Ask—Who is the Expert?
- Throw expectations out the window!
- Avoid clichés
- Adjusting to a new normal
- Do not avoid speaking the name of the person who has died
- Make eye contact with the grieving person
- Know what resources are available in your community
- Be specific when offering help
- Don’t forget the children!
- LISTEN!
  “I was halfway to silence when I heard your voice.” - May Sarton