A RESOURCE FROM NACG MEMBERS

NACG
NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR CHILDREN'S GRIEF

SUPPORTING CHILDREN GRIEVING A SUBSTANCE-USE RELATED DEATH

INTRODUCTION

This resource was created for those supporting a child who is grieving a substance-use related death. In three sections, this toolkit gives information relevant to family members or caregivers, information for community members, and a resource list for those seeking additional information.

We know the words we use when supporting a child who is grieving are important. You will see consistent language is used throughout this toolkit to speak about substance-use related death and disorder. These terms avoid some of the negative associations which can come from other words and the allocation of blame. These words also recognize substance-use disorder as an illness, separating the person from the stigma and judgment.

The death of a person as a result of substance use can be a challenging and emotional experience for families. Their grief may be compounded by feelings of anger, guilt, and/or sadness. The most important thing we can do is to recognize that each grief experience is unique, just as the relationship was with the person who died. **Listening is critical and is the single most important way you can support a child or teen.**

Substance-use related deaths are often stigmatized, surfacing taboos, judgments, and misconceptions. The stigma associated with the death may leave the family feeling isolated, ashamed, and misunderstood. The information known about the person's substance use is also significant. The person may have had a substance-use disorder, used substances in social or non-consistent ways, or may have died from a single use. The child may need support in navigating these and other complexities of a substance-use related death.

A substance-use disorder can place tremendous stress on the family. The person may have hidden their disorder from the child, so their understanding of it was their absence. Others may have seen emotions expressed in unhealthy ways or through a lack of emotions. When someone dies of a substance-use related death, the grief may have started before the death. They may have been unavailable to the child or acting differently as a result of their illness. There may have been prior struggles with the person who died and the death may surface unexpected feelings like relief that may feel complicated for children to navigate. The nature of substance use may also impact the grief experience. In cases of long-term substance use, the child have experienced anticipatory grief before the person's death.

All children are likely to experience changes after the death of a significant person in their life. These changes can feel like additional losses, challenging a child's sense of stability and security. This can include moving homes or neighborhoods, changing schools, adapting to a new caregiver, financial changes, and a shift in responsibility on the child. It is important to consider these changes when offering support.

When to seek additional support

After any death, it is important to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional. Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation

These changes can have an impact on the griever and the other family members. When changes in behavior go unnoticed and unaddressed, this can create an imbalance within the family. Addressing these changes will help create a supportive and safe environment for each member of the family. Consider people in the child's life may struggle with substance use while grieving. If this is something you feel is present, please seek professional support.

Sometimes grievers may want to connect with others for additional support. If a child and family are connected to a recovery community, this may help as it provides access to resources, including groups, sponsors, and an understanding of substance-use disorder as a disease. Alanon, Alateen, Alatot, and Children and Family Recovery Programs may also help.

Connecting with others allows the griever to share their story, understand they are not alone, and validate and normalize their experience. It is important to acknowledge a family member's readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey. You can find additional support in your area by visiting https://nacg.org/find-support/ .

If you believe someone is thinking about suicide, assume you are the only one who will reach out. People can call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org for themselves or if they are worried about someone who may need crisis support. Visit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (afsp.org) website for additional resources.

***Inclusive Gender Statement:** In the context of this document, the use of the term "child(ren)" encompasses both boys and girls, as well as any other gender identity or gender expression that falls within the spectrum of childhood. This language choice is intended to promote inclusion and respect for the diversity of gender identities and non-binary genders.

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INFORMATION FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

Supporting children after a substance-use related death requires open communication, honesty, and empathy. As a trusted adult, you can be the first to answer and openly acknowledge the child's questions and concerns. Remember each child's grieving process is unique, and offering age-appropriate explanations can aid in their understanding and healing. Creating a safe and supportive environment for children to express themselves and ask questions is vital in helping them cope with this challenging experience.

Families might hesitate to share the true nature of the death due to the associated stigma, shame, and shock. However, being honest with children in your conversation and providing information that is both accurate and age-appropriate is crucial. You may be concerned that the subject is too complicated or mature for young children, but remember this is just the start of what will be an ongoing conversation as the child grows. While you can gradually introduce more details as you feel they are ready, understanding the cause of death is important in this initial conversation. Without clear information, children may create their own narratives, leading to misunderstandings and potential self-blame. Remind them a substance-use related death is a result of a collection of factors and circumstances and no one person or thing could have caused or prevented the death.

What can help children impacted by substance use?

- Be patient.
- Avoid making promises that may be hard to keep.
- Keep them in the know. Share as much as you can about what is ahead. Giving a sense of predictability can help restore control and safety.
- Create safe space for big emotions.
- Dedicate time to play and talk with them.

It is helpful to prepare children for stigmatizing or hurtful language they might hear. Let them know that you are available to answer questions they might have or to listen if this occurs.

> *"Some people can be unkind to people who use substances, and you may hear people say mean, hurtful, or untrue things about them. I want you to know you can come and talk to me about it or ask me questions. This is a safe space for you to say anything."*

Understanding of death and grief for children is linked to a child's development. To learn more about how best to support the child please review our dedicated Developmental Understandings resource. In the event of a death by suicide, please find dedicated information in our NACG Supporting Children who are Grieving a Death by Suicide Toolkit.

Learning more about the complicated factors that influence substance use can help children better understand the struggles their person faced. In cases of substance-use related deaths, some family members may have been aware of the person's struggle, while others may not have known about their substance use until the death. Recognize substance use as an illness like any other medical condition, and this understanding can help children as they grieve their person.

Reminder: The conversation to tell a child someone has died is just the start of what will be an ongoing conversation as the child grows.

Considerations for Families

Here are some unique considerations for families where a death is substance-use related. Below are some key points to consider:

Guilt and Self-Blame: Family members may experience feelings of guilt and self-blame, questioning whether they could have done more to prevent the death or support their person in their substance-use disorder recovery. Acknowledge these feelings, but remind them substance-use disorder is an illness and not something we can control.

Shock and Disbelief: The sudden and unexpected nature of a substance-use related death can leave family members in a state of shock and disbelief. It may take time for them to process the reality of the death.

Sense of Isolation: The stigma surrounding substance-use related death can leave families feeling isolated and alone in their grief, especially if they lack supportive people who understand their experience. Creating a non-judgmental and empathetic environment for children is crucial to help with their emotions.

Intrusive Questions: Families may encounter intrusive questions from others about the circumstances of the death.

Shame and Stigma: In some cases, families may experience feelings of shame and stigmatization due to the circumstances of the death, especially if the deceased struggled with substance-use disorder.

Unanswered Questions: The nature of substance-use related deaths may lead to unanswered questions, particularly regarding whether the death was intentional or accidental. Additionally, toxicology reports may take weeks or months, prolonging the uncertainty for families.

Legal Considerations: In cases involving substance use, there may be legal considerations or interactions with the justice system. Families may be navigating these complexities while also processing their grief.

Anger and Frustration: Feelings of anger may arise towards the person who died, towards oneself, or towards others whom family members believe may have contributed to the death. Provide a safe space for expressing and processing these emotions.

Anticipatory Grief: In cases of long term substance use, survivors may experience anticipatory grief – distress felt in the days, months, or even years before the person's death.

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Feeling Unsafe: The death of a person due to substance use can impact a child's sense of safety. Create a space for them to share and process these thoughts.

Impact on Children: Children in families impacted by substance use have the potential to experience trauma reactions, such as heightened fear and anxiety. They may also develop maladaptive behaviors, thoughts about secrecy, inability to trust adults or fear of being removed from the home. Acknowledging and addressing these issues is important for their well-being. Access professional support if needed.

Remembering Beyond Substance Use: Family members may find it challenging to remember the person beyond their struggles with substance use. Sharing memories of their life can be helpful.

Remember: There is no "right" way to feel or cope with the death. Each person's grief journey is unique, and it is essential to allow space for everyone's feelings. Seeking support from friends, family, or a mental health professional can be helpful.

Supportive Communities:
If a child and family are connected to a recovery community, this may help as it provides access to resources, including groups, sponsors, and an understanding of substance use disorder as a disease. Alanon, Alateen, Alatot, and Children and Family Recovery Programs may also help.

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Information to Support You in Telling a Child Someone has Died

Preparing for the conversation:

- **Where to share:** At their home or at a place the child feels safe.
- **Who should share:** An adult the child has a pre-existing and safe relationship with (i.e., caregiver, grandparent, family member)
- **When to share:** When the child is not hungry or tired and when the adult has time to sit with the child after and be with them for support if needed.
- **How to share:** Be yourself and use a neutral tone. We encourage you not to rush through this conversation, taking deep breaths yourself and moments to pause.

Remember:

- Allow space for the child to ask questions throughout the conversation. The child's questions are a good way to gauge what they are ready to hear.
- Validate and allow space to process all emotions that may arise. Give your child permission to feel all their feelings and normalize that they might feel sad, angry, confused, happy, worried, etc.
- Use clear language (e.g., died instead of passed away).
- Help the child in identifying safe people who will support them.
- Consider helping children and teens practice a response to questions about the death so they can feel more confident and comfortable when asked by others.
- All families have different understandings and beliefs about substance-use disorder. We encourage you to use explanations that fit your family beliefs, but be honest.
- It is okay to take a break from the conversation and follow up later.
- **Follow your child(ren)'s lead by specifically answering their direct questions.**

For additional support in telling a child someone has died, please view our Telling a Child Someone has Died resource.

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VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

Birth to 5 years old

Considerations:

- Their awareness of death is directly influenced and limited by the child's ability to understand their world.
- Death is viewed as the absence of a parent or caregiver.
- They may be preoccupied with who will take care of them.
- They may see themselves as responsible in some way for the death.
- They may not yet recognize time since the death or understand the irreversibility of death.
- They may want to "die" to be with the person who died.

Example of How to Share the News of a Substance-Use Related Death

WHERE TO SHARE

At their home, or at a place the child feels safe

WHEN TO SHARE

When the child is not hungry or tired

START BY SHARING

"(Child's name), something very serious happened. (Person's name) died, which means their body stopped working and they are no longer living. (Person's name) will not be coming back."

Follow your child(ren)'s lead by specifically answering their direct questions.

Some examples of things they may ask are:

How did they die?
"(Person's name) died from an illness called substance-use disorder. You can't see or catch this illness from a sneeze, cough, or tummy ache."

Why did they do it?
"I'm not sure. I wish I understood.."

Remember it is normal to see younger children hear hard things and then go back to playing or act as if they didn't hear anything. This can be their way of grieving and be an indicator to the adults in their lives what they can tolerate at any given moment.

CHILDREN

6 to 12 years old

Considerations:

- Their awareness of death is influenced and limited by their ability to think about their world.
- Many emotions related to grief can be explained and understood. They can experience a combination of emotions and feelings can come and go.
- Their feelings can be attributed to a number of causes. Do not assume what is causing them to feel this way, ask them. It may not always be related to their grief.
- They have a better understanding they are not responsible for the death logically at this age but may still have thoughts that they did something to attribute to the death. It is important to validate those feelings while also making sure they understand the facts of the death.
- They recognize death is permanent.
- They will be able to appreciate how the loss of a person in their lives will affect them over time but may not understand the long-term impact of a death.

Example of How to Share the News of a Substance-Use Related Death

WHERE TO SHARE

At their home, or at a place the child feels safe

WHEN TO SHARE

When the child is not hungry or tired

START BY SHARING

"(Child's name), something very serious happened. (Person's name) died, which means their body stopped working and they died. They used a substance that made their body stop working / A substance made their body stop working."

Follow your child(ren)'s lead by specifically answering their direct questions.

Some examples of questions they may ask are below:

Why did they do this? Share that this is a good question and that there is no good answer. You could also say, *"I'm not sure, and I wish I understood."*

Consider asking questions such as:

- *"How can I be the most supportive to you? Do you want to talk about this with me?"*
- *"What would feel comforting to you right now?"*

TEENS

13 years old to adulthood

Considerations:

- The teen's awareness and understanding of death is similar to adults. They can understand there may be multiple causes and consequences of a death.
- Complex emotions related to grief can be explained and understood. They can also experience more subtle emotions such as regret, ambivalence, or relief. Do not assume what is causing them to feel this way, ask them. It may not always be related to their grief.
- Teens do not inherently see themselves as responsible for a death but are apt to analyze information to determine who or what is responsible.

Example of How to Share the News of a Substance Use-Related Death

WHERE TO SHARE

At their home, or at a place the teen feels safe

WHEN TO SHARE

When the teen is not hungry or tired

START BY SHARING

"(Person's name) died by using a substance (or share the specific substance)." Share what you know and what is shareable information.

Follow your teen's lead by specifically answering their direct questions.

Some examples of questions they may ask are below:

How did they die?
"They used..."

Why did they do it?
"I am not sure. I wish I understood."

Invite them to share what they think and know about substance-use related death in general and this death specifically.

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INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

As a coach, youth leader, mentor, family friend, or another supportive community member, you may be thinking, "What is my role in helping a child or teen after a substance-use related death?" Worrying about what to say, when to say it, and how your interactions may impact them is common. This resource will provide practical information to help you.

Factors To Consider Before Offering Support

As a support person in this child's or teen's life, you play a critical role in their grief and healing journey. Before we talk about ways you can support a child or teen who is grieving a substance-use related death, it is important to understand some of the factors that make grieving this type of death complex. Being informed of the complexities surrounding substance-use related deaths can help guide how you offer support. If you are looking for more information about children and grief, you can access our GriefTalks.

People often do not know what to say or do, so they end up saying and doing nothing. This can contribute to children and teens feeling isolated and unsupported while grieving a substance-use related death.

Not being ready to share or talk about how someone died is a personal right needing to be honored and respected. Remember you may have different information about the death than what the child shares with you. Your role is to support them in what they choose to share with you and you should never contradict them or provide additional information.

Important considerations:

- Children and teens do better when surrounded by adults who are ready to help and support them.
- Not all children and teens who experience a substance-use related death of someone significant are traumatized. Trauma is subjective, so it is important not to assume a specific cause of death was traumatic for the griever.
- There are often many unanswered questions surrounding a substance-use related death. This can leave children and teens not knowing how to respond to questions or process the death.
- Different cultural, religious, personal, and political views can influence how a child or teen acknowledges and shares a substance-use related death.
- Children and teens grieving a substance-use related death may experience intense feelings of guilt, regret, anger, relief, shame, and self-blame.
- Set your thoughts and beliefs about substance use aside before you offer support to the child.

How to be a Support Person

Here are some ways to be supportive and create a welcoming space for children and teens who are grieving a substance-use related death.

Show up and be yourself. The aftermath of a substance-use related death can create an a lot of change for children and teens. Children and teens need safe, consistent, and predictable people and places they can count on. They need you to show up fully as yourself each time they see you.

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Talk openly, honestly, and without judgment. Being a safe adult requires you to be a trustworthy adult. Find an opportunity to check in and acknowledge the death and communicate that you are a safe person to talk to who will not judge them.

> *"Hey, (name of child or teen), do you have a minute? I just wanted to let you know that I heard about (name of deceased)'s death. Things like this can be really hard to talk about, but I want you to know you can always talk to me about this. I care about you and want to support you."*

Be a good listener. Good listeners create safe environments where hard conversations can take place. They clear away distractions so they can focus on the child or teen. Listeners pay close attention to what the child or teen is saying with their words and body language. They periodically check their understanding of what is being said by asking clarifying questions and empathizing with and validating all feelings in a supportive and non-judgmental way.

- *What is the name of your person who died? Tell me about your person. What was their favorite color? Song? Season? Holiday? Food? Music? Movie?*
- *What is comforting on hard days, and what do you do to get through hard days (i.e., coping skills)?*
- *What are you thinking?*
- *What is on your mind?*
- *How are you doing today?*

Ask for permission and respect boundaries. When someone dies from a substance-use related death, children and teens get asked many questions they may not be ready to answer and might feel pressure to talk about what happened. As a support person, ask the child or teen what and how they would like information shared, if at all. By doing this, you give the child or teen a choice and voice on how this news is shared if they wish not to have anything shared, respect that too.

Focus on feelings and not details. The details are less important than the child's emotions about them. Allow space for the child to share how they feel instead of focusing on what happened.

Checking in. It is important to remember there is no timeline for grief. Consider the child's or teen's grief as they achieve new developmental competencies and major milestones. Checking in during these times shows you understand grief is a process and you care.

> *I remember you saying that [insert holiday] was your dad's favorite holiday. With [insert holiday] being next week, I wanted to check in with you and see how you're holding up and what plans you have for that day?*

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Create a drop-in space. Designate a place - an empty office, a corner with coloring sheets, or a separate room - for a child or teen to use as they want or need, especially if they start to feel overwhelmed or overstimulated. This may give them a sense of security and control without explaining their feelings.

Help create supportive communities. Children and teens grieving a substance-use related death can experience insensitive and hurtful comments and questioning. In your role, it is important to let others know the expectation around being supportive. Consider sharing with peers:

> *"When someone dies, certain things we say, or questions we ask can be difficult for the child who is grieving to hear. Let's try our best to avoid asking too many questions or making comments that might add more pain, sadness, blame, or embarrassment. Instead, you can show your support and do your best to help the person who is grieving feel loved and cared for."*

Take Care of Yourself, Too! Being a support person to a child or teen who is grieving a substance-use related death may sometimes feel emotionally overwhelming. It can suddenly call into question your need for emotional support. When you offer emotional and practical care to someone close to you on an ongoing basis, you may experience compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is the emotional and physical exhaustion that occurs when caring for others. Remember, your role is to show up in small, consistent, and manageable ways. No one person can be responsible for solely supporting a child or teen in their grief. It takes a network of adults working together to adequately support children and teens after a substance-use related death.

Be with children in their feelings. Often, there are no 'right' words to say when supporting children who are grieving. It is important to validate any feelings they share and continue showing up in their lives consistently over time. Depending on your relationship with the child, it could be helpful to set yourself reminders of some of their possible hard days (i.e., first day back at school, Mother's/Father's Day, birthdays, anniversaries, etc.). Checking in the month and the year after someone died, is just as important as checking in the day after.

Be Curious. It will be important not to make assumptions about the child's thoughts or feelings. Use open-ended questions (i.e., tell me more) and invite the child to share. Keep an eye out for both the words they use and how their bodies are when they talk (or if they don't talk). We do not know all of what people have experienced. It is also essential to recognize the child may have been exposed to substance-use disorder before their person died. Depending on your relationship with the child, it might not be appropriate to know (or ask) about this. Regardless of your relationship with the child, it is important to remember their experiences are relevant to how they process their grief.

Thank you for being there as part of the child's support team. When in doubt, just show up and listen. Being listened to is healing.

Additional Resources

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Additional Resources

The inclusion of any organization or resource does not imply or constitute an endorsement or recommendation, nor does exclusion imply disapproval.

Online:

- USC Rossier MAT - Inside USC Rossier Blog: Supporting Children and Teenagers Through Loss After an Overdose, https://rossieronline.usc.edu/blog/supporting-students-overdose-grief/
- Institute for Research, Education & Training in Addictions: Parental Overdose and Grieving Children, https://ireta.org/parental-overdose-and-grieving-children/
- Child Mind Institute: Helping Children Cope with Grief (Advice for a Traumatic Death Such as Suicide or Overdose), https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief/#block_4ac73819-3d78-4663-bdfb-73e24d03f661
- Hey Sigmund: Tips for Talking with Children about Addiction and Overdose Loss, https://www.heysigmund.com/tips-talking-children-addiction/
- Sacramento Funeral and Cremation: Helping Yourself Heal When Someone You Care About Dies of a Drug Overdose, https://www.sacramentofuneralandcremation.com/griefarticle/article/overdose
- Cake: What to Say if Lost a Child to a Drug Overdose: 25+ Ideas, https://www.joincake.com/blog/what-to-say-to-someone-who-lost-their-child-to-drugs/
- NPR Houston Public Media: When A Loved One Dies Of Overdose, What Happens To The Family?, https://www.npr.org/2016/02/18/464463631/when-a-loved-one-dies-of-overdose-what-happens-to-the-family
- United States Drug Enforcement Administration: One Pill Can Kill, https://www.dea.gov/onepill
- Sesame Workshop: Resources and support for families struggling with a parent's addiction, https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/parental-addiction/
- Very Well Mind: How to Talk to Kids About a Parent's Addiction, https://www.verywellmind.com/what-to-tell-children-about-a-parents-addiction-66633
- Eluna: How to Explain Addiction and Substance Use Disorder to Children (6-12), https://elunanetwork.org/resources/how-to-explain-addiction-and-substance-use-disorder-to-children-6-12
- American Addiction Centers: 5 Tips for Explaining Overdose Deaths to Our Children, https://projectknow.com/blog/5-tips-for-explaining-overdose-deaths-to-our-children/
- University of Minnesota: Talking to kids about an overdose death, https://opioid.umn.edu/talking-kids-overdose#:~:text=Even%20if%20a%20person%20living,or%20other%20types%20of%20loss.
- Alanon, Alateen, Alatot, and Children and Family Recovery Programs, https://al-anon.org/

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Additional Resources continued

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Books:

- Bucci, M., Marques, S. S., Oh, D., & Harris, N. B. (2016). *Toxic Stress in Children and Adolescents. Advances in pediatrics*, 63(1), 403–428. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yapd.2016.04.002
- Dyson J. L. (1990). *The effect of family violence on children's academic performance and behavior*. Journal of the National Medical Association, 82(1), 17–22.
- D'Arrigo, T. (2022). *Severe Grief Tied to Experiencing, Witnessing Overdose*. Psychiatric News; American Psychiatric Association. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.pn.2022.10.10.16
- Formica, S. W., Apsler, R., Wilkins, L., Ruiz, S., Reilly, B., & Walley, A. Y. (2018). *Post opioid overdose outreach by public health and public safety agencies: Exploration of emerging programs in Massachusetts*. The International journal on drug policy, 54, 43–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.01.001
- Huber, M.J., Umphrey, J.E., Surico, E.F., Lepore-Jentleson, J., & Johns, B. (2019). *Conversations for Change: Grassroots Effort to Reduce Overdose and Deaths Related to Opioids.*
- Ray, M., Roberts, J., & O, R. L. (2018). *Someone I Love Died from a Drug Overdose*. Centering Corporation.
- Uzwiak, B. A., Hudgins, A., & Pizzicato, L. N. (2021). *Legacies of the war on drugs: Next of kin of persons who died of opioid overdose and harm reduction interventions in Philadelphia*. The International journal on drug policy, 97, 103351. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103351
- Winstanley, E. L., & Stover, A. N. (2019). *The Impact of the Opioid Epidemic on Children and Adolescents*. Clinical therapeutics, 41(9), 1655–1662. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinthera.2019.06.003
- Wolfelt, A. D., PhD. (2020). *Understanding Your Grief after a Drug-Overdose Death*. Companion Press.

Helpful links for additional information from the NACG:

- NACG Supporting Children who are Grieving a Death by Suicide Toolkit: https://indd.adobe.com/view/797974f7-5353-4834-b48c-cefe12464ded
- NACG Developmental Understandings Resource: https://indd.adobe.com/view/246ac201-44b2-4dd2-b7cb-b53c2094b64b
- Telling a Child Someone has Died Resource: https://indd.adobe.com/view/30642226-7e34-4a8e-a1ca-0669896f56fa
- NACG Grief Talks: https://nacg.org/resource-library/?topic=grieftalk
- NACG Resource Library: https://www.nacg.org/resources
- NACG Find Support: https://www.nacg.org/find-support

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The **National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG)** is a nonprofit organization raising awareness about the needs of children and teens who are grieving a death and provides education and resources for anyone who supports them. Our Vision is for no child to have to grieve alone. Visit childrengrieve.org to find these and other resources.

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