



A Project of Chai Lifeline

12 “Easy” Steps: Helping Young Children Cope with Loss

**A Guide for Teachers and Parents of
Younger Elementary School Students**

*Rabbi Dr. Dovid Fox
Director of Interventions and Community Education, Project Chai
dfox@chailifeline.org*

12 “Easy” Steps: Helping Young Children Cope with Loss

1. Emotions

- *Before* attending to children’s reactions to loss, it is vital that you understand *your own emotions* and responses to what has happened. Self-awareness will allow you to plan, and deliver, your message in a way that children can understand and accept.
- *How* you discuss loss with children is as important as the content of what you actually say. Exhibiting your honest emotions can be helpful for children, as long as they do not feel that you are overwhelmed or incapacitated by what has happened.
- Do not hesitate to talk with a trusted friend or relative (or a rabbi, educator or mental health professional when indicated) if you feel that you need your own outlet *before* talking with children.

2. Expect

- It is vital to know what to typically **expect** when young children respond to loss. Some common reactions include:
 - asking very blunt questions about the dead body or concerning the manner of death.
 - repeatedly asking the same, or similar, questions.
 - talking about the deceased or the death, then suddenly leaving to go play, and coming back a few minutes later to resume the conversation.
- These reactions are very common and normal, and represent the way in which children integrate difficult information and grapple with making some sense of loss.
- Such questions may also show the concern that children have for the deceased, and it is important to assure them that he/she is not feeling any pain (and is not hungry, cold, lonely or in any distress, depending on the questions being asked). See “Educate” below regarding spiritual issues which may need to be addressed as well.
- On a deeper level, these questions, along with the types of reactions listed below, may also signify the fears and anxieties that children often experience, including:
 - being afraid that something bad may now happen to them or people they care about.
 - feeling guilty about having “caused” the death in some way.
- It is important to reassure children that they will be safe and protected, and that they were not responsible for what happened in any way. Timing and delivery are crucial – you want children to feel safe, but without perceiving that their feelings are being dismissed or belittled.
- Chai Lifeline’s brochure, *When Tragedy Strikes*, can be helpful in preparing for what you may see, and how to best respond.

3. Empathy

- Children, like most adults, do not usually want sympathy. Rather, they seek **empathy**, the feeling that someone else is trying to understand and feel what they are going through.
- Once children sense your care and understanding, they are more likely to share their emotions and therefore feel less isolated and scared. If they feel that you are talking down to them or expressing pity, their resolve to remain quiet and secretive may become strengthened.

4. Emulate

- Model appropriate emotional responses so that children can **emulate** your example and feel free to express their inner feelings. If you feel comfortable, you can use yourself as an example to begin a conversation. An opening line could go as follows: “When I heard about the tragedy, I felt sad. I was thinking that if adults are affected like this, I wonder what children go through? I would really like to hear how you are doing after what has happened.”
- Seeing that you are sad or upset, but *not* overwhelmed by your emotions, can serve as a valuable model for children to help them cope with what they are experiencing.

5. Express

- Now that you have gained a measure of self-awareness, coupled with understanding possible reactions from children and how to deal with them, your goal is to establish a safe and secure environment for children to freely share and **express** their feelings.
- Children should feel free to talk and participate as they wish. They should not feel pressured or coerced to talk, even if you feel that it is in their best interests to express themselves at this time. Children have an innate sense of self-protection; hopefully they will “open up” when the time feels right for them.
- There are many ways that younger children can express themselves in addition to talking. Creating handmade condolence cards, drawings, photo albums, collages, poems or short stories are all very meaningful ways of self-expression. Projects involving *tzedaka*, *chesed* and Torah-learning provide spiritually meaningful outlets as well.
- When shared with the bereaved family, these efforts can also restore a measure of control to children since they feel like they are “doing something” to help others feel better.
- All of these activities can be done individually, or implemented as part of a group or classroom initiative.

6. **Eliminate**

- Adults often utilize many euphemisms to describe death in the hopes of minimizing or eliminating the anxiety that loss can cause for children. However, commonly used words or phrases like “sleeping,” “on vacation,” “lost” or “passed away” can actually be counterproductive for children.
- Since young children tend to be very concrete in their thinking, such terms can create unwanted side effects such as undue fears of sleeping or getting lost. Such language tends to leave children confused as to what has actually happened to the deceased. Therefore, it is in the children’s best interests if you **eliminate** these types of words and phrases when discussing death and loss.

7. **Elementary**

- Keep the conversation basic and **elementary**. What you say, and how you say it, should be easily understandable and acceptable for the intellectual and emotional capacities of young children.
- Talking too much, using words or phrases they don’t understand, or being too emotional, can prove confusing or scary.

8. **Educate**

- It is vital to **educate** young children as to what death means in very practical and real terms.
- Refer to the paragraphs above (particularly “Eliminate” and “Elementary”) for some basic guidelines in discussing death and loss.
- When discussing loss with children, it helps to use words like “dead” or “death.” Within the Jewish community, some prefer to use words like “*niftar*” or “*petirah*.” Many adults are concerned that such a frank discussion will unduly scare children; however, experience shows that when discussed properly, it can actually serve to calm and clarify issues for them.
- Explain that the person who has died can no longer move, breathe, eat or see. Due to their intellectual and emotional developmental stage, young children often have difficulty understanding the idea of permanence. As discussed before, adults should resist the temptation to describe death as a “long sleep” – while this may seem the easiest and least scary way to portray death, it actually tends to confuse or scare children.
- On a very practical level, explain what occurs at a *levaya* and during the *shiva* period *if the children will be attending any of these events*. If they do not plan to attend, carefully weigh the benefits of initiating such a discussion.

- Introducing and explaining Jewish concepts like *neshama* and *Olam HaBah* can be very helpful, calming and soothing when explained properly. Be careful to anticipate possible questions that may arise. For example, after having adults explain the beauty of *Olam HaBah*, children may wonder why people are sad and crying if the *niftar* is in such a wonderful place.
- Since such spiritual ideas may be difficult for even adults to fully grasp, they can certainly be even more challenging for young children to comprehend. The better you understand these concepts yourself, along with keeping the language and level suitable for young children, the more successful you will be.
- If questions arise that you are unable to answer, you can simply respond, “That’s a good question, I really don’t have an answer (right now).” It is important for adults to “permit” themselves to not always have immediate answers to every question, especially regarding esoteric matters. The honesty and sincerity of your response can impact children in a very positive and healthy way.
- If needed, consult with a rabbi, educator or mental health professional who has had some experience in speaking with children about these matters. Children will respect that you cared enough about their question(s), and about them, to seek answers from others.

9. Encourage

- **Encourage** children to seek out helpful adults who are available if/when they want to talk. You can have them make a list of trusted adults in their lives which should include: yourself, parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, principals and rabbis.
- Make clear when these adults are available to talk or meet, and how to contact them. Knowing who to turn to, at what times and by what methods, will help to focus and calm children significantly.
- Review activities that children can engage in to help calm themselves when needed. The list will be unique to each individual or group, and will likely include: talking, singing, reading, writing, walking, playing with a friend or sharing private time with a parent.
- In some situations, focusing children on how they have successfully faced difficult or scary situations in the past can help them to cope with the current circumstances. However, for some children, recalling prior problems may have the opposite effect and cause them to become more anxious. *It is extremely important that you have a solid understanding of the child(ren) you are dealing with before attempting this approach.*

10. Empower

- By allowing children to vent their fears and emotions, validating their experiences, and focusing them on their strengths and who they can turn to in times of need, you **empower** them to cope with the issues at hand and thereby restore a sense of control and calm.

11. Entry

- Talk with children about how they can help a bereaved classmate **enter** class again following the death in his/her family. If the bereaved child is observing *shiva*, you should have a window of a few days to have this discussion
- Explore how they think their friend may be feeling, and how they think he/she would (or would not) wish to be treated. This discussion should be very concrete and directed, and will provide some insight into what the children are thinking. It also allows you to correct any misunderstandings and provides a basis for future reference if issues or questions arise.

12. Evaluate

- Continue to monitor and **evaluate** how the children are coping and behaving, both at home and at school. Children are blessed with resilience, but it is still vital to monitor how they are dealing with the loss. Remember that children's moods can change quickly, sometimes from day to day or even within the span of a few hours.
- It is not advisable to constantly ask children, "How are you doing now?" This tends to exacerbate, rather than calm, the situation.
- Rather, take an opportune time following the loss to let children know they can speak with you when needed. Children who are talkative by nature, or anxious about what has occurred, may well open up to you. Those who are generally quiet and soft spoken, or very overwhelmed by what has happened, will at least know that a sincere offer has been made and may possibly opt to talk at a later time. The genuineness with which you extend the offer can have an inherently positive impact on children as well.
- Each child experiences death differently, and the majority of children get "back to normal" relatively quickly. (Please refer to Chai Lifeline's brochure, *When Tragedy Strikes*, for an overview of common reactions.)
- *If children's reactions are so frequent, intense and/or longstanding that their normal routines are significantly disrupted, additional interventions may be needed. If at any time you feel that children's reactions are severe to the extent they are possibly dangerous to themselves or others, immediate action should be taken.*