



# Kids' Grief Information Sheet

## Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)

This resource offers information about the grief kids may feel when their person is having MAiD and ideas for how to help your child and family cope. This information is based on the premise that children cope better when they are given honest, age and culturally appropriate information about illness, dying and death, including MAiD.

Every child is different, and each family has their own values, traditions, and culture. Please use what is relevant to you in this document and leave what is not. Consider meeting with a professional like a counsellor, social worker, spiritual advisor, or death doula to create a kids grief support plan that works best for your family.

### Grief Starts Before Death

This is called anticipatory grief. Children might feel sad, scared, or worried about their person's upcoming MAiD. They might also feel relieved their person won't be suffering anymore, or happy and connected when spending time with their person. Knowing the exact date and time of their person's death can inspire families to find ways to say good-bye. This can bring comfort and stress as the day of MAiD gets closer. Talk about anticipatory grief with your child and teach them ways to cope that work for your family context (Alvis et al., 2020).

### Kids' Feelings "Puddle Jump"

Children cycle through emotions differently from adults. One moment they might be sad and withdrawn, the next excited and playful. Changing emotions can be a form of resiliency and healthy coping for young children. Show your child that all feelings are welcome (Revet et al., 2020).

### Signs of Grief

Children respond differently to grief based on their personality and temperament, family culture, stage of development, and relationship to the person who died (Alvis et al., 2022; Slaven, 2017).

Children under 11 might experience:

Younger children	All children		Older children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reverting to earlier behaviors like needing help getting dressed, thumb sucking, potty training, and language delays</li> <li>• Asking when their person is coming back</li> <li>• Acting out their grief, feelings, or their understanding of their person's death through play or artwork</li> <li>• Needing to be close to their adult or not wanting to sleep alone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bursts of big feelings</li> <li>• Irritable</li> <li>• Withdrawing from activities and friends</li> <li>• Fear or concerns about how their person is going to die/died, especially if they don't have facts about MAiD/the death</li> <li>• Tummy aches and head aches</li> <li>• Problems with sleep, tired, and changes in appetite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longing for their person, sadness</li> <li>• Wanting/not wanting to talk about their person</li> <li>• Treasuring items that belonged to their person like a piece of clothing, sports equipment, or jewelry</li> <li>• Doing activities their person loved or listening to their person's favorite music</li> <li>• Sharing memories about their person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problems with school/academics</li> <li>• Embarrassment or feeling different from their friends</li> <li>• Feeling concerned about their own death or getting sick</li> </ul>

## When to Seek Help

A wide range of emotions and responses are normal in children's grief. Think about seeking help from a professional if your child experiences:

- persistent trouble with daily activities like attending school, eating, sleeping etc.
- guilt or anger about the death
- persistent isolation or loneliness
- loss of interest in hobbies
- low energy/affect or seems to always be "on alert" and anxious
- intrusive thoughts or images related to the death or the person who died
- avoiding talking about the person who died or things that remind them of the person who died.

## Children's Concerns or Questions

Children often have the same questions or concerns when their person is sick or dying. Tending to these concerns can be a part of helping children process their grief (Worden, 1996).

### Did I Cause it?

Young children can mistakenly believe something they did or didn't do or thought caused their person's illness or death (e.g., they were rude, hugged their person too tight and hurt them, or in a moment of anger wished their person was dead). With MAiD, children might believe they caused their person to want to die. This can cause feelings of guilt or distress.

**What you can do:** Share factual, age-appropriate information with your child about the circumstances of their person's illness or disease and their death, including information about MAiD. Tell your child they did not cause their person's illness nor make them want to die. Explain the disease/condition is making their person die and/or suffer. Their person would choose to live if they could, but that's not possible.

### Can I Catch It?

Children might be worried about themselves or others falling ill or dying like their person.

**What you can do:** Explain the difference between communicable illnesses and non-communicable illnesses like cancer. In the case of communicable illnesses, like Covid-19, talk about what people are doing to prevent transmission and reassure your child they are safe.

### Can I Cure it?

Many children long to fix or heal their person. Magical thinking might make them believe they can heal their person through good behavior or by suggesting they take vitamins or other things they think might be curative. Children might believe they can do something to stop their person from having MAiD.

**What you can do:** Explain how their person's disease is making their body die and that there are no medicines or things anyone can do to stop the disease from making their person die. Reassure your child their person would choose to live and spend more time with them if they could, but it's not possible.

Explain their person has thought a lot about their options and is choosing MAiD because it is right for them. If appropriate, talk with your child about how their person feels about MAiD. For example, many people like having control over *when* and *how* they die, feel grateful to have MAiD as an option, or comforted knowing they will have a peaceful death.

In the case of MAiD Track 2 applicants where death is not foreseeable, try explaining their person can't do the things they love anymore because of their disease/condition. If you choose, gently explain the types of suffering they are experiencing (e.g., they are in pain, they can't take care of themselves anymore, they are forgetting important things and the people they love). Take care not to over-share or scare your child with too much detail. Let your child lead the amount of information they want by asking "what questions do you have?" Explain their person isn't choosing to die, they are choosing to end their suffering. Explore the things you can do to help their person and the child feel comfortable and cared for.

### Who Will Take Care of Me?

Children may worry how their daily lives will change through their person's illness and after their death. For children losing a parent or caregiver, their daily lives will change significantly. Some children wonder who they will do their special activities with after their person has died.

**What you can do:** Talk with your child about the people that love and support them, especially those who will be caring for them. Explore what your child is concerned about and what they will miss most about their person. Involve your child in making plans for their care to the extent they are able.

### How Can I Stay Connected?

Though they are gone from their lives, many children want to remember and honour their person. Facilitating ongoing connection can help children transition to a new reality without their person. Children may also want to connect with other grieving people, especially those in their inner circle, to share their feelings and mourn together.

**What you can do:** Let your child know you are open to talking about and remembering their person. Try role modeling how *you* create ongoing connection. For example, if it's culturally appropriate, place pictures of the person around the house, display objects that were important to them, cook their recipes, or take the family to places that were special to your person. Allow your child to engage as much or as little as they would like. Letting your child lead when and how they want to be involved can empower them. For children with anxiety or worries, letting them control their involvement may prevent them fixating or rumination on their loss. Sometimes, witnessing an adult's healthy grief is enough for children to feel safe. When they are ready, they will participate.

Setting the stage for ongoing connection *before* MAiD can soften anticipatory grief, help children prepare for loss, and understand it's safe for them to share their feelings. Ask your child what they appreciate most about their person, what special role they play in your child's life, or what they want to remember about their person. Explore ways to honour their answers. Children may want to identify an object that reminds them of their person and keep it with them; do a legacy project with their person like a collage of family photos; or a service project for a cause that is important to their person. Give your child options for ongoing connection, let them know their person will always be remembered, and no matter how much time passes, your child can always share their feelings with you (Clapburn et al., 2021; Pearlman, 2012).

## Ways to Cope

### Breathing

Breath work calms the mind and the body so that kids can think clearly and express what they need.

**Balloon Breathing:** Imagine you have a big balloon in your belly. When you breath in you can see it blow-up or expand. Put your hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall with your deep breaths. Do this 5 times.

**Birthday Candle Breathing:** Imagine it's your birthday and in front of you is your favorite birthday cake with all the candles lit. Take a deep breath down into your belly then gently blow out all the candles. Do this 5 times, nice and slowly.

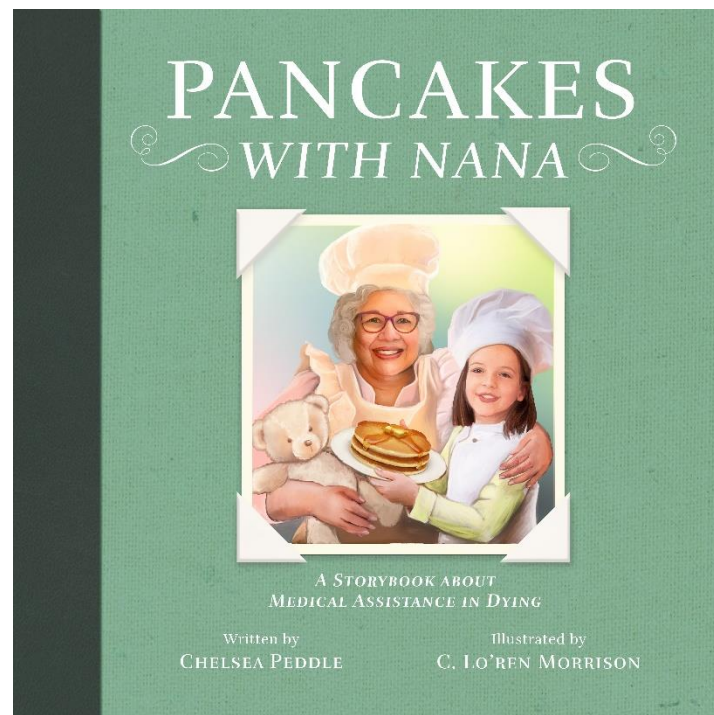
### Keeping Your Routine

Sticking to a routine can help kids feel safe and secure. Naturally, there will be some changes as it can be hard to stay on a course during a time of stress, especially if adults are caring for the person who is having MAiD. Try to find a few things to keep consistent every day, like:

- Eat dinner together.
- Do bedtime at the same time every night, read stories and talk about your day (many kids open-up at night and are more willing to talk).
- Get regular exercise like going for a family walk on weekends.
- Schedule regular time to have fun together and play.
- Find intentional moments of rest and quiet during the day for every family member.
- Maintain expectations about what kids do/their responsibilities e.g., their morning routine of making their bed, getting dressed, clearing their dishes etc.

### Love and Attention

Your attentiveness and care, and willingness to guide your child are some of the most important elements in fostering kids' grief. Kids need to trust their adults will be there for them, especially when they are experiencing big behaviors and feelings that might feel scary and out of control. Children need to feel like they belong and are part of the family. You can help with this by sharing information, welcoming their feelings, guiding them in healthy expression, and showing compassion (Alvis et al., 2022). Children need love and affection, and this can sometimes feel hard when their behaviors test our patience, or they need a lot of attention. As grieving caregivers, it's important to find ways to care for yourself so you can be present with your children, and not overwhelmed by your own grief when you are with them.



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