

# WHEN DIFFICULT THINGS HAPPEN

*A guide from the Fred Rogers Institute  
for supporting children through  
hard moments in life*



## WHAT YOU CAN SAY...

Start by asking a child what they already know. This will help you know where they are and where you can begin the conversation. You might learn they have been told or imagined things that are not true, and those things may be much scarier than reality.

Be honest, simple, and clear with your words. Use direct language like “died” or “sick” or “divorce” instead of language that may be confusing and create more uncertainty or fear.

Go slowly as you begin hard conversations. Give children just what they need to understand, and give them time to consider, wonder, and ask questions before you give more information.

Make sure the child knows this hard thing is not their fault, and not their responsibility to fix.

**“When the gusty winds blow and shake our lives, if we know that people care about us, we may bend with the wind... but we won't break.”**

**- Fred Rogers**

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Let the child know you are always open to their questions, whether they have them now or later.

Young children, especially, might need you to say the same thing many times, on many occasions, as they process and understand.

If a child asks you a question that you don't know how to answer, you can say, “That's a really important question. I don't know the answer to that, but I will let you know when I know.” or “I wonder about that, too. What do you think?”

There are no perfect words and there is no perfect timing. Your loving care and attention is what children need.

"There is one thought that I feel can be helpful to grown-ups and children alike: Sadness isn't forever. I'm not suggesting that we remind ourselves of this in order to lessen our grief. On the contrary. The knowledge that time does bring relief from sadness and that sooner or later there will be days when we are happy again may allow us to grieve more fully and deeply when we need to."

- Mister Rogers Talks with Parents

## WHAT YOU CAN DO...

One of the best things you can do is be there, without judgment, while your child experiences whatever feelings come up as they learn about and process difficult things.

Help children identify and know that their feelings are valid and accepted. For example, you can say: "You feel sad about that. It's okay to feel sad."

Share some of your own feelings.

Help children identify ways to express their feelings.

Aim to keep routines and expectations consistent - or let children know what has to change and why - to help them feel secure and safe.

Let children know hard feelings don't last forever, and that many feelings can happen at the same time. Even when you feel sad, you can feel happy, too.

Make space for play. Children of all ages process through their feelings with play. Depending on the child and their age, this might look like make-believe, art, rough-housing, basketball with friends - play is as unique as the child.

Build a support network. Help the child identify several safe and trusted adults.

Think about ways the child can participate during difficult moments. There may be an age-appropriate involvement or responsibility - such as a ritual or tradition like a funeral - that will allow the child to be an active part in healing.



*Please refer to the Child Wellness page on our website for additional information on supporting children through difficult times.*