

LOSS AND GRIEF SUPPORT **essential** CHECKLIST

Step 1: Choose Concrete, Literal Language

Because autistic children interpret information literally and concretely, avoiding metaphors is essential to prevent intense confusion, anxiety, or fear.

- ☐ **Avoid well-meaning euphemisms:** Do not use phrases like "passed away," "went to sleep," or "we lost them."
- ☐ **Prevent unnecessary fears:** Recognize that telling a child a loved one "went to sleep" may cause a terrifying fear of going to bed, and saying someone is "lost" implies they can be found.
- ☐ **Use clear, direct words:** Gently but firmly use the words "dead" or "died." Though these words feel harsh to neurotypical adults, they provide the physical clarity a neurodivergent child needs to process the reality.

Step 2: Explain the Biological Reality of Death

Grounding your explanation in physical reality gives your child a clear "why" that helps them understand that death is permanent, rather than a temporary absence.

- ☐ **Describe the body stopping:** Explain death as a biological event where the person's body has completely stopped working.
- ☐ **Break down simple bodily functions:** Gently share that the heart has stopped beating, the lungs are no longer breathing, and the person can no longer do everyday things like eating or playing.
- ☐ **Reassure them regarding pain:** Comfort your child by explaining that because the body has stopped working, the loved one can no longer feel any pain, cold, sadness, or hunger.

Step 3: Create Social Stories for Predictability

Funerals and memorials are high-sensory environments filled with unpredictable rituals and strong, unfamiliar emotions. A social story provides a comforting visual "roadmap" to reduce sensory overwhelm.

- ☐ **Describe the exact setting:** Use pictures or text to show what the room will look like, including specific details like flowers, a casket, or a large photograph.
- ☐ **Prepare them for other people's grief:** Explicitly explain that people might be crying, hugging, or talking in very quiet voices, and reassure them that these reactions are perfectly okay.
- ☐ **Outline the step-by-step routine:** Map out what will happen first, second, and last during the ceremony so there are no surprises.
- ☐ **Review the story frequently:** Read through the social story multiple times *before* the event to build a sense of safety and predictability.

Step 4: Scout and Identify "Quiet Zones"

Emotional events can escalate quickly, and having a pre-planned sensory escape route ensures your child feels safe if the environment becomes too loud or overwhelming.

- ☐ **Coordinate with the venue:** Before the service begins, locate a calm, low-sensory area or a separate room away from the crowd.
- ☐ **Designate a "safe person":** Appoint a familiar adult whose primary job is to sit with your child and quietly escort them to the quiet zone or take them home early if needed.

Step 5: Offer Tiered Choices for Participation

Grief is an incredibly personal experience. Forcing a child into an overwhelming situation can be distressing, whereas offering choices empowers them and ensures they feel included within the family unit.

- ☐ **Offer 2 to 3 clear choices:** Give your child control over their level of participation by presenting simple, respectful options:
 - *"Would you like to come to the service, or would you prefer to stay home with a familiar person and look at family photos?"*
 - *"Would you like to draw a beautiful picture to leave at the service, or would you prefer to say a few words out loud?"*
 - *"Would you like to plant a special flower in our garden to remember them?"*

Step 6: Build Tangible, Visual Keepakes

Because abstract memories can sometimes be difficult to hold onto, having physical items provides immense, lasting comfort and allows your child to maintain a connection on their own terms.

- ☐ **Create a dedicated memory book or album:** Compile photos and digital folders of videos so your child can look at and listen to their loved one whenever they miss them.
- ☐ **Assemble a "memory box":** Gather physical items that remind your child of the person, such as a soft piece of fabric from a favourite shirt or a small, meaningful memento.



We are walking this path with you. Healing takes time, patience, and a community that surrounds you with love. Whenever you need customized visual schedules, emotional supports, or a caring professional to lean on, Monarch House is right here.

Connect with us today - because you belong, and your family's grief matters to us.