

Helping a Child Cope with Loss and Grief

Overview

Ways to give children extra support and to answer their questions simply and truthfully when someone dies.

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Children hear the word death almost every day -- on television, in the movies, and in the news. This does not mean that they understand what death means or are prepared for it when it touches their own lives. All of the images can seem very confusing when a loss strikes close to home and children experience feelings of deep grief, often for the first time.

Helping a child cope with loss and grief is one of the hardest things any adult will ever do. It can be much more difficult when you are experiencing your own pain, or if the loss has occurred so suddenly that you were emotionally unprepared for it. How can you provide the extra support needed by a child who may be feeling very alone and frightened? No matter how painful the loss has been, there are steps you can take to help a child understand what happened and continue to feel loved and secure.

Talking truthfully about loss

Almost nothing is harder than telling a child that someone has died. Even before you fully understand your own feelings, you may need to help a child face a complicated range of emotions -- fear, sadness, anger, confusion, and guilt. Here are some ways to ease the pain for both of you:

- *Tell your child as soon as possible.* If you don't tell your child about a death promptly, he may hear the news from friends or neighbors and become frightened or confused.
- *Choose a quiet and familiar setting.* Select a place where you won't be distracted by visitors or a ringing telephone -- a backyard, a quiet bedroom, a nearby park.
- *Use simple words.* The younger your child is, the simpler your explanation should be. Too many details can distract him from the fact that a death has occurred. You can always provide more information if your child seems confused by what he has heard.
- *Be direct.* Using words like died or death in a gentle but accurate way helps a child begin to understand what has happened. You might say, "You know that Grandma has been sick for a very long time from cancer. She wasn't sick the way you were when you had the chicken pox last year -- it was very different. We all hoped she would get better. But she didn't, and now she has died from the cancer."

- *Listen carefully.* After giving your child the facts, let him respond. You may want to remain silent for a few minutes while he thinks about what you have said. He may need more time than usual to respond to your words. Ask your child if he has questions. Most important, let your child know he can talk to you at any time.
- *Talk about your own feelings.* Let yourself cry and admit that you feel sad. This gives your child permission to express his own feelings. You may be able to encourage him to open up by saying things like, “I’m very sad, because Uncle Joe died, and I loved him a lot. Now I won’t see him any more.”
- *Show your love.* Remember that the news may make your child very afraid of losing you. Reassure him that you are there for him. Give him a hug. Hold his hand. Stroke his hair.
- *Offer reassurance.* Remind your child that most people who are hurt or sick get better, and live until they are very old. Help your child remember one or two good things about the person who died. You might say, “I know you’re going to miss Mr. Jones a lot, because he was a wonderful teacher and made you laugh a lot.” This tells him that it’s OK to feel different emotions, both happy and sad, when he thinks about the person who has died.
- *Be patient.* Children -- even teenagers -- may ask the same questions over and over. This is a natural way of trying to understand something that seems very confusing.

Understanding a child’s fears

Every child responds in a different way to the death of a friend, relative, teacher, or other important figure. But most children have several of the same questions, and they may or may not know how to express their concerns in words. Anticipating these questions can help you provide the reassurances your child needs to overcome her fears:

- *Who is going to take care of me?* If your child has lost a parent or older sibling, she may wonder, “Who will love and protect me?” Or she may have very specific fears. She may wonder, “Who will fix my lunches?” or “Who will help me get ready for school?” You can help by reassuring her both that you will always love and take care of her and that she can keep up her everyday routines. Talk about her favorite activities and how you will help her continue them -- “Now I’m going to walk you to the school bus,” or “Grandma is going to stay with us for a while, so she will fix your snack when you get home from school.”
- *Was the death my fault?* Children often worry that they are to blame when someone dies. They may think that they caused the death by not being “good” or by being angry with the person who died, so it’s important to reassure your child that the death did not result from anything she thought or did. Some

children find comfort in simple medical explanations like, “Daddy had a problem with his heart. The doctors tried to fix it, but they couldn’t, and he died.”

- *Will the same thing happen to me?* After a death, many children realize for the first time that they could die. They may even worry that death is contagious. Your child may not ask about death, but she may be worrying about it. So it’s important to bring up the subject and be reassuring. A child who asks “Will I die, too?” may be afraid she will die *soon*. You might respond by saying, “It’s true that someday everybody will die. But people usually die when they are old or very sick, and you are young and healthy. Dad and I are very healthy too and we’re probably going to live a long time.” This kind of comment acknowledges the reality of death but reassures the child that she can’t “catch” it from the person who died.

Handling the funeral or memorial service

One of the first questions you will face after telling a child about a death is whether the child should attend the funeral or memorial service. A funeral offers your child a chance to share his grief with family and friends, and help him absorb the fact that the death has really occurred. Here are some things to consider:

- *Funerals help children accept the fact of death.* For this reason, many experts believe that children over 6 (or children who have started school) benefit from attendance. You may want to allow 3- to 6-year-olds to attend if they seem ready for it.
- *Don’t force a child to attend a funeral or memorial service.* Instead, ask questions and try to understand their feelings about the event. Your child may be afraid that he won’t know what to say or do at the service. If so, you can provide the support he needs to feel comfortable there. You may want to encourage your child to attend, but he should be given a choice.
- *“Rehearse” children who will be attending.* Explain that people will be going to the service to say goodbye to the person who died. Tell your child what he will see and hear. Make sure your child knows that people may be crying, and that it’s all right for him to cry, too. Explain what a casket is -- for example, by using a shoebox and a doll -- if your child will see one. If you need help preparing your child for the service, you might ask a relative, friend, or member of the clergy to help you do this.
- *Plan something special for your child to do.* If you will be having a religious service, find out from your clergy person if your faith has a special way of including children. Ask your child if he would like to put something in the casket -- a picture, a letter, or a special item, such as a shell from the beach that your family visits each summer.

- *Ask an adult your child knows and likes to stay with your child during the service if you are unable to do so yourself.* It's important for someone to be with your child throughout the service in case he wants to leave briefly or has other concerns.
- *Decide if your child is emotionally ready to attend a burial service.* It can be very difficult for younger children to see a box with a person in it being buried in the ground. It's important to talk about this ahead of time with your child and to give your child permission to not attend the burial service if they feel scared or too upset.

Helping a young child cope

Even when they are young, children have many of the same emotions that adults do when they grieve. They experience the stages of grief that adults do, including denial, anger, bargaining, guilt, and sadness. But they may not understand why or know how to put their feelings into words. Children respond differently to death at various ages. As they grow and mature, they still have intense emotions, but they have a clearer sense of what happened and have the ability to talk about some of the things that are troubling them.

Under age 2

- *Remember that even babies will react to a loss.* Your baby won't realize that someone has died, but will react to changes in her environment. You may notice irritability or crying, or changes in appetite or sleep patterns. These changes will usually go away as soon as your child's world becomes settled again.
- *Stick to a schedule.* A predictable schedule is very reassuring to a child who senses that a change has occurred. Try to find ways to continue your child's usual routines for eating, sleeping, and playtimes. This kind of continuity may help you keep your emotional balance, too.
- *Soothe your child.* When someone dies, your child needs extra reassurance that you won't go away, too. Touch her. Kiss her. Hold her on your lap as much as you can. Even if she can't understand all that you're saying, the sound of soothing words can help to calm her.

Ages 3 to 5

- *Help your child express his feelings.* At this stage, your child will have some ability to express his emotions in words. Spending time alone together and talking in simple terms about your own feelings ("I feel sad," "I want a hug") will encourage him to open up. Reading your child a book about death or dying can help get the conversation started. A child who can't talk about his feelings may be able to express them another way. He may draw pictures, act out a tragedy with toy cars or trains, or even fantasize about killing the person who told him about the death. Although actions like these can be unsettling, they allow a

child to let out pent-up feelings in a safe way. You can help your child do this by giving him tools for self-expression -- finger paints, modeling clay, paper, and colored markers.

- *Avoid words that could be misinterpreted.* Young children often take words very literally. If you say, "We lost Grandma," your child may think that his grandmother will be "found." Or, if you say that "Grandma has gone to sleep," he may think that she will wake up, or he may become afraid of going to bed himself.
- *Realize that your child may see death as reversible.* Preschoolers often find it difficult to understand that a death can't be undone. After all, they see cartoon characters coming back to life every week. They may engage in "magical thinking," or believe that by being good enough or wishing hard enough they can bring someone back to life. Don't be surprised if your child repeatedly asks where the person is who died, or when the person is coming back.
- *Try to anticipate fears.* Even children who realize that someone has died may not have a clear sense of cause and effect. If a relative died in a hospital, your child may think that everybody who goes into a hospital dies. Make sure your child understands that when people go into the hospital, doctors usually help them get better.
- *Expect behavior changes.* After a loss, young children very often show signs of distress. These can include health problems (rashes, headaches, or stomachaches), intense fears (of the dark, going to bed, or being alone), and a return to former habits (thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, or clinging to a favorite doll or blanket). These are a normal part of grief and usually disappear after a period of adjustment.
- *Be loving.* A 5-year-old child at times may seem very grown up. But the loss of a close friend or family member may make him feel very afraid and he may start to act like a toddler again. He may need more kisses, hugs, and hand-holding than he used to. Show that it's OK to say things like, "I'm feeling very sad, and I need a big hug."
- *Consider taking your child to see a counselor.* Losing a close friend or family member is so traumatic that even when a child seems to be doing well, he may have fears he doesn't know how to bring up. Especially if he's had more than one loss, be alert for signs that he would benefit from professional help. A therapist or counselor can work with him (and with you) and give you ideas on how to help your child handle his grief. Parents or caregivers with children under the age of 13 need to take an active part in any therapy with a child.

Ages 6 to 12

- *Think about your child's needs.* At this stage, children begin to understand that death is permanent. They can handle greater detail about what happened.

Think about how your child has reacted to other very sad events -- the death of a pet, the news of a school shooting on television -- before deciding how much information to give.

- ***Tell the truth.*** Your child probably has friends or relatives who will talk about the death, so it's important not to mislead her. If your child's father died in a violent crime, and you say that he died in an accident, she may hear different stories from others and feel unsure of whom she can trust.
- ***Be prepared for any reaction.*** Some children respond to a death with angry outbursts while others become silent and withdrawn. Many try to fix the blame on a single person or event that they believe caused the death. Some become angry with the adult who told them about the death. Children who have had a poor relationship with the person who has died may express feelings of happiness or relief that that person is no longer around, while at the same time experience feelings of guilt if they are old enough to know that those feelings are not the accepted norm for the relationship, such as a son and father. All of these are normal ways of trying to make sense or gain control of something that leaves your child feeling helpless. Encourage your child to talk about her feelings, whatever they may be. Physical activity can be a helpful release.
- ***Expect questions.*** Your child may show her fear that you will die by asking indirect questions, such as "How old are you?" or "Where are you going?" These may mean, "Will you leave me, too?" Give your child lots of reassurance that you will protect and take care of her.
- ***Show your own feelings.*** If your child feels extremely sad about what happened, she may find it very comforting to hear you say, "I feel very sad, too." Don't be afraid to let her see you cry at times. This lets her know that it's OK for her to cry, too.
- ***Let your child's teacher know what happened.*** If your child has lost someone close to her, her teacher may want to give her extra attention for a while, and may also be able to give you practical advice on easing her anxieties. Don't be surprised if your child's grades drop temporarily. You may also want to prepare your child for questions from classmates, and encourage her to give a simple statement like, "My dad died."
- ***Provide outlets for your child's emotions.*** Encourage your child to express feelings that she may not be able to talk about yet. Give her a blank notebook, a box of watercolor paints, or the materials for making collages from pictures in magazines.
- ***Watch out for signs of trouble.*** If your child seems to be having unusual trouble managing her fears -- or has become uncharacteristically angry and fearful or withdrawn -- think about taking her to a therapist who can help her cope and adjust to the loss and grief she is feeling.

Answering difficult questions

After a loss, your child may ask you difficult questions about death. These may include:

- **“What’s dead?”** Many children find the idea of death very hard to understand, especially if they are experiencing it for the first time. Explanations like “Grandma went to sleep forever” may add to the confusion by making a child think that a dead person will magically “wake up.” A good way to explain death to a child is to say what a dead person can’t do -- for example, “When you’re dead, you can’t see, hear, or breathe.” You might also explain that “dead” is different from being asleep: “When you’re asleep, people can wake you up by talking to you or touching you. When you’re dead, no matter what people do, you don’t wake up.”
- **“Is she in heaven?”** If religious beliefs are part of your life, they can be a great comfort to your child when someone dies. Many children find it very reassuring to believe that a parent has gone to heaven or has become an angel. But it’s important not to tell your child something you don’t believe. If you say “Mommy is in heaven,” even though your family doesn’t pray or attend religious services, your child may become very confused by words that don’t fit in with the rest of her life. Instead, tell your child honestly what you believe, and remember that it’s all right to admit that you aren’t sure what happens after death. You might say, “Nobody really knows what happens to people after they die, but we do know that we will always love Mommy, even though we can’t talk to her or see her any more.”
- **“What’s cremation?”** Try to handle questions about cremation especially sensitively. Children may find the idea of cremation frightening, or associate fire with punishment or “being bad.” You might say, “Some people don’t want to be buried in the ground. These people say that they wanted to be cremated. When you are cremated, a very hot fire turns your body into soft ashes. These ashes can be put in a container called an urn or sprinkled in a special place. Uncle Bill wanted to be cremated because he loved the lake where he went fishing every summer, and he wanted people to scatter his ashes on the lake.”

Helping a teenager cope

Helping a teenager cope with death can be especially complicated.

- **Realize that your teenager may react to a death the same way you do.** Your teenager may suddenly feel afraid or vulnerable even if he is normally strong and confident. Let him know that it’s natural to feel worried or upset. Try to listen carefully and understand what he is saying. He may show his fears in ways that he did when he was younger -- by crying, clinging, having night terrors, or being very fearful. Try to be loving and understanding. Adjusting to

a big loss takes time. Your teenager needs extra love and support during this time.

- *Talk honestly about what happened.* Don't try to diminish the nature of the loss or suggest everything will still be exactly the same. Instead, let your child know that you will be there to help him with any difficult or confusing feelings he may have.
- *Give clear and accurate information about what happened.* Ask your teenager if he has questions about the death. If he has misconceptions, try to help correct any false ideas and ease fears, especially if he feels responsible for what happened.
- *Be patient.* Your teenager may ask the same questions or want to talk about the same events over and over. Let him talk about the death as often as he needs to. Talking with you will help him gain control of his feelings and make sense of what happened.
- *Say how you feel.* Explain how the death affected you. Teenagers can understand mixed emotions -- sadness about a death, but relief that suffering has ended. Admit that you miss the person who died, and show that you care. But don't burden your teenager with grownup worries. Talk to other adults about those.
- *Help your teenager find support.* Encourage him to talk about the death with important people in his life -- teachers, coaches, close friends. If he loves computers, help him find an online support group for teenagers who have lost someone they love. On the Internet, visit www.GriefNet.org to find out about support groups for grieving children and dozens of other groups for coping with loss and grief. A librarian can suggest books, videos, and other Web sites.
- *Temporarily lower your expectations of school and home performance.* Your teenager's attention and emotional energy may be focused elsewhere for weeks or months.
- *Help your teenager find comfort in routines.* Encourage him to listen to favorite music, do artwork, play basketball, or stay in touch with close friends. Keep routines simple at home.
- *Don't forget that if there has been previous loss, the death may bring up old pain.* If your teenager knows someone else who died -- or even if his best friend recently moved away -- his sense of loss may be magnified. Talk to him about how he has dealt with earlier losses and recovered from them.
- *Suggest that your teenager keep a journal.* Encourage him to record his moods, thoughts, feelings, and worries. Or help him find a new way of expressing himself -- for example, by taking music or art lessons. Writing, music, and art can all be helpful in coping with powerful emotions, disturbing thoughts, and feelings of grief.

- *Encourage your teenager to stay connected.* Watch out for a tendency to withdraw into pain and loneliness. Urge your teenager to see friends and keep up normal activities. Many adolescents are wonderful about rallying to help each other in times of need. Encourage your teenager to reach out to friends. If he seems too isolated, you might give him a new way to reach out -- for example, buy him the telephone he's been begging for or help him get started with a new sport.
- *Don't assume that everything is OK just because your teenager hasn't said much about the death.* Sometimes, teenagers are so confused by a painful event that they avoid talking about it or hesitate to show how afraid they feel. You may need to take the first step and bring the subject up when you have some private time together.
- *Get help if problems continue.* Usually, a teenager's grief heals itself over time. But sometimes the fears can interfere with the enjoyment of everyday life. Seek the help of an expert if your teenager continues to have difficulty in school (academic or social), shows physical symptoms (headaches or stomachaches, drug or alcohol abuse, trouble sleeping, increased or decreased appetite), or exhibits emotional problems (excessive crying, clinging, withdrawal, or angry outbursts). If you're not sure whether your teenager needs counseling, talk to his teachers or ask him whether he'd like to talk to a professional about some of the things that are on his mind.

When a child loses a parent

The death of a parent is the most serious loss that a child or teenager can face. Someone who loses a mother or father faces the same kinds of fears and sadness that occur after the death of a sibling or grandparent -- but in a greatly intensified form.

- *Talk to your child about the parent who died.* As you allow your child to grieve, talk also about your happy memories of the person who died, and encourage your child to share her own memories. Children may have mixed feelings about their relationship with the parent who has died. Be open to hearing both the positive and the negative feelings that your child may have. If your child is having strong negative emotions about the person who has died, it may be helpful to see a professional who can help your child resolve her feelings. This tells your child that it's OK for her to continue to have a lot of thoughts and strong emotions about the parent -- that feelings don't go away just because someone has died. Talking also helps preserve memories, even if your child may not fully understand them until she is much older.
- *Remember that you can't do everything alone.* If you're a surviving parent, get help from your relatives and close friends. Ask if they would be willing to play a bigger role in your life and share some of your family events. Try to get help from at least one adult of the same sex as the parent who died. Your child may

find it easier to talk about certain things with an adult of a particular sex, especially during adolescence. Be sure to allow yourself time to grieve and find support for yourself through family and friends. Remember that timelines for the grieving process vary from person to person, and that it often can take a year or more for some people to resolve the death of someone close to them.

- *Help your child continue to enjoy normal childhood experiences.* Resist the urge to use your child as a substitute spouse. Your child needs to remain a child. Say that you feel sad, but don't burden her with all the worries that you shared with your spouse. This may make her feel responsible for solving adult problems. Talk to other adults about these. Your child's teacher may be able to suggest other single parents or counselors you can call when you feel overwhelmed.
- *Reassure your child that you will always take care of her.* Your child may be very worried about questions like, "What if I get sick or hurt and nobody can reach you?" Tell your child how you will handle emergencies. Give her the phone number of a close relative or neighbor she can always call if she can't reach you. At least for the first few months, you might consider getting a beeper or cell phone so your child knows she will always be able to get in touch with you quickly.
- *Plan special activities for holiday times.* Holidays can be especially difficult for you and your child. Continue the activities you always enjoyed as a family but add a few new ones that will help your child remember and celebrate the life of the lost parent.
- *Help your child find special ways to remember the parent who died.* Draw a family tree. Give your child framed photos of her parent for her room or help her load the pictures into her computer. Encourage her to make a photo album or scrapbook. Plant a bush or tree in memory of the parent.
- *Consider talking to an expert even if your child shows no signs of problems.* Losing a parent is so difficult for a child that you might benefit from a "check-in" conversation with a therapist very soon after the parent dies. A therapist can suggest what kinds of trouble signs to watch for and what to do if they arise. Early intervention may help you to keep small problems from turning into much larger ones.

Grief in stepfamilies

Children in stepfamilies have the same concerns that arise in other kinds of families, but they may experience them differently.

- *Old family conflicts may resurface.* If you've been out of touch with an ex-spouse or in-laws, a death may bring you together again at a visitation, funeral, or similar event. This can stir up old conflicts that may further upset children who are struggling with grief. Try to prevent this from happening by talking

beforehand with any “exes” (spouses or in-laws) who may be present and agreeing to resolve or put aside your differences while you are mourning.

- *A death may intensify the loss felt from a divorce.* If there has been a divorce followed by the death of a stepparent, your child may feel that he has “lost” one parent to divorce and another to death. If he is very young, he may wonder if he has been especially bad to have lost two people close to him. If he is a teenager, he may have the sense that life has unfairly singled him out for pain. Pay very close attention to his feelings. He may need expert help to continue to view the world as a place where he can feel safe and valued.
- *The funeral or memorial service may pose special concerns.* A child who lives with a stepfamily may feel very confused about where he belongs at a funeral or memorial service. For example, he may wonder which parent to sit with at a funeral when both his divorced parents are present. Try to keep him from feeling that he must “choose sides” at the events following a death. Give him permission to do what feels most comfortable.

Taking care of yourself

Keep in mind that both young children and teenagers will look to you for cues on how to respond to a death. How your child copes will depend to some extent on how you cope. It’s important to take care of yourself so that you can give your child the support she needs.

- *Take care of yourself.* Get enough sleep, eat well-balanced meals, and try to stick to regular routines.
- *Seek support from others.* Because you are also under stress, it is vital that you talk to friends, counselors, adults, and other parents. Share your anxieties and frustrations with them. And don’t be afraid to ask for help.
- *Consider joining a group.* A therapist or clergy person may be able to help you find a support group for people who are dealing with loss and may have ideas on how to help children cope. Or you can join an online discussion group for people who are dealing with grief. On the Internet, visit www.GriefNet.org to find out about support groups for widows and widowers, parents who have lost a child, adults who have lost a parent, adults who have lost a friend or sibling, and many others. A librarian or a friend who is good with computers can also be a resource.
- *Give yourself time to reflect on what happened.* Don’t try to rush the healing process for your child or for yourself.

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