

Supporting your child

after the death of a family member or friend



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THE DEATH OF a family member or friend is painful for children and teens—just as it is for adults. Children may not have experienced a loss before or understand what it means; they may be unsure how to react. Or they may have had multiple losses; they will still be deeply affected.

This handout offers advice to parents and other caregivers about how to support children who are grieving. Talking with your children about a death is especially difficult when you're dealing with your own grief. Children may ask difficult questions, such as: How could something this unfair happen? What's going to become of our family? Adults often ask such questions as well, even when they don't expect an answer.

We don't need to have all the answers for children. We can help most by simply being present with and attentive to children as they ask questions and express their feelings.

It is upsetting to see your children struggle with loss. Parents and guardians are often overwhelmed with their own grief. They may not know how to support their children. They want to believe that their children are OK. Because of this, some parents are not fully able to see the ways their children are suffering.

Here are some things to remember: Your children are concerned for you. They wonder how you are coping. They may worry about your health and whether you too will die. They may hesitate to bring up questions or ask for help because they don't want to upset you. It is important to invite them to ask questions and talk about their feelings, even though you may also be upset.

It's OK to show your feelings.

Children know when adults are genuine and honest. When children see that parents and other adults have strong feelings and find ways to cope, it helps them learn how to cope, too. This is an important opportunity to show children ways to understand and express their upset feelings. Sharing the experience of loss with your children helps everyone in the family recognize, feel and cope with the strong emotions.

You can help children understand what has happened.

When speaking with children about the death of a loved one, use the words "dead" and "died." Other expressions, such as "everlasting sleep" or "passed away," may confuse children and make it hard for them to understand what has happened. Be sure young children (especially preschool-age children and those in early elementary grades) understand four major concepts:

- 1. Death is irreversible.** If children do not understand that death is permanent, they may not be able to start to grieve the loss. They may be angry that the person has chosen not to return.
- 2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.** Children who do not understand this concept may worry that someone who has died is cold, hungry or in pain.
- 3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.** If children do not understand this, they may wonder what they did, or what the person who died did, that caused this particular person to die. This leads to guilt and shame.
- 4. There are physical reasons that someone dies.** When children understand the true reasons for a death, they are less likely to make up explanations that cause them to feel guilty or ashamed.

No child is too young to be affected by the death of someone close. Even infants respond to the death of someone they care about. They miss the familiar presence of a parent. They sense profound emotions around them, and notice changes in feeding and caregiving routines. Young children can grieve deeply, even though they may not appear to be doing so. They tend to sustain strong emotions for brief periods of time, and then take a break. They often turn to play or other activities. Even when a young child seems fine, offer love, support and extra attention during times of grief.

Invite older children and youth to talk.

Older children and youth may not be ready to talk when you offer to speak with them. They may prefer time alone or talking with their friends. They may say they do not need or wish to talk, even when they are actually feeling overwhelmed. Don't try to force the conversation. Wait for them to accept your invitation. Acknowledge that this can be difficult to discuss, and let them know you have found it helpful to talk about your feelings. Help them identify other adults with whom they can speak when they are ready. This might be a teacher, guidance counselor or mental health provider in the school (your children's teachers can help you find the right people); your children's pediatrician or pediatric healthcare provider (who will know about other resources in the community); or a religious leader. Remain available and supportive, and continue to offer to talk from time to time.



Children often feel guilty after a death has occurred.

Children of all ages, as well as adults, often wonder what they did, didn't do, or should have done that would have prevented the death. This may happen even when there is no logical reason to feel this way. Children may also feel guilty for surviving the death of a sibling. They may feel guilty if they are having fun or not feeling very sad after a family member has died. Children are often reluctant to share their guilt feelings. Reassure your children that they

are not responsible for the death, even if there is no reason to suspect they feel guilty.

Children may appear selfish and immature after a personal loss. Children tend to be most concerned with things that affect them personally. As they struggle to deal with a personal loss, children may appear more self-centered and immature than usual. They may become more demanding, refuse to share, or pick fights with family members. They may say things that seem very selfish or uncaring. This selfishness is not a sign that children don't care about the person who died or the needs of others. Rather, it demonstrates that they are under stress and grieving. Show your concern and continue to provide support. Avoid criticizing them for behaviors that seem self-centered or insensitive. Once they feel their needs are being met, they will be able to think more about the needs of others.

Invite children to participate in funerals and other memorial services.

When a close friend or relative has died, children should be offered the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service whenever possible. When children are not allowed to take part in these important events, they often resent being excluded. They miss the support provided by friends, family and (as appropriate) their religious services. They worry about what is so awful in the service. What is being done to their loved one that they are not permitted to see?

- **Explain in simple terms what will happen.** Where will the service take place? Who will be there? What is likely to occur? Will the casket be open? Will people be telling stories of funny or pleasant memories? Will there be a lot of crying? Invite and answer questions.
- **Let your children decide whether or not to attend.** Don't force them to participate in any ritual or activity they find frightening or unpleasant. Let them know it's OK to take a break for a few minutes or leave if they are uncomfortable.
- **Find an adult to be with each child.** Especially for younger children, find an adult who can stay with each child throughout the service. This person can answer questions, provide comfort, and give the child attention and support. It's best if this is someone the child knows and likes who isn't directly affected by the death, such as a babysitter, neighbor or staff member from school. This adult can focus on the child's needs, including leaving the service if the child wishes.
- **Offer a role in the service.** Children may appreciate a simple task, such as handing out memorial cards or helping to choose flowers or a favorite song for the service. Suggest something that will comfort and not overwhelm them.

- **Offer other options.** Younger children may want to play quietly in the back of the sanctuary or meeting area. This still gives them a sense of having participated. Older children and youth may want to invite a close friend to sit with them in the family section.

Provide support over time.

Children who have lost a family member or close friend generally feel that loss throughout their lives. There are things you can do to help children cope over time.

- **Help children preserve—and create—memories.** Even though it may at first be painful to talk about the person who died, keep the person's memory alive through stories, pictures and continued mention of the person in everyday conversation. Children often like to have physical reminders of the person who has died. They may want to carry a picture or object that reminds them of the person who died, or keep one in a special place at home.
- **Anticipate grief triggers.** Memories and feelings of grief can be triggered by anniversaries, family holidays or other important events. They may bring up sudden and powerful feelings of sadness. Everyday events can also be reminders—a favorite song, a story, mention of the place they last went on vacation, etc. These grief triggers can catch people off guard. Talk with your children's teacher about how to handle these triggers if they happen in class or elsewhere at school. Schools can set up a place where children can go when triggers occur. They may want to talk to someone or simply to leave a discussion that brings up painful memories. Once children know they can leave, they rarely need to do so.

Talk to your children's teachers.

Children often have difficulty concentrating or learning while they are grieving. They may benefit from tutoring, extra support, or temporary changes in their test schedules or other classroom demands. Don't wait for school problems to start before seeking help. Talk to your children's teachers and other key people at the school, such as coaches, band directors and club sponsors. You may want to talk to the

school counselor as well. Even if your children don't want to speak to a counselor, the counselor can act as a resource for advice about how to improve things at school or where to find additional services in the school or community. When your children change schools or start a new year with new teachers, talk with the school again.



Talk to your children's pediatrician or other healthcare provider.

Children may be worried about their health after a death has occurred. A visit to their doctor may provide reassurance for you and your children about their health. It can also provide an opportunity for healthcare providers to talk directly with your children to figure out what they understand and how they are coping. Healthcare providers can also help identify community services, such as bereavement support groups or bereavement camps.

Grieving can last a lifetime but should not consume a life.

Children never "get over" a major loss such as the death of a close family member or friend. Children grieve in stages and over many years. At each new stage in their lives, such as when they graduate from school, get married, have their own children or reach the age when a parent died, they will have new skills in thinking and relating to others. They will use these skills to reach a more satisfying explanation of this death and a better appreciation of the impact it has had on them and those they care about. In many ways, the work of making meaning from a death never ends. But, over time, this work becomes less difficult and takes less energy. It may start as a full-time job. Later, it becomes more of a part-time effort that allows other meaningful work and experiences to occur. With this, satisfaction and joy become a larger part of your children's lives.

For more information, the New York Life Foundation offers a free booklet, *After a Loved One Dies—How Children Grieve: And How Parents and Other Adults Can Support Them*. You can download a PDF or order hard copies in either English or Spanish at no charge at www.nylgriefguide.com.

You can locate bereavement resources in your state and community at www.achildgrief.com.

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement has free resources. Additional materials for supporting grieving children in schools can be found at www.schoolcrisiscenter.org.