

SUPPORTING A GRIEVING CHILD

Young children feel the pain of bereavement, but they learn how to express their grief by watching the adults around them. After a loss – particularly of a sibling – children need support, stability and honesty. They also need extra reassurance that they will be cared for and kept safe. As an adult, you can support children through the grieving process by demonstrating that it's okay to be sad and helping them make sense of the loss.

Answer any questions children may have as truthfully as you can. Use very simple, honest and concrete terms when explaining death to a child. Children, especially young children, may blame themselves for what happened and the truth helps them see they are not at fault.

Open communication will smooth the way for a child to express distressing feelings. Children often express themselves through stories, games and artwork – encourage this self-expression, and look for clues in those activities about how they are coping.

How parents can help a grieving child

- As soon as possible after the death, set time aside to talk to your child.
- Provide professional support for your child; talk to your family doctor or your child's school counselor for a referral to a child therapist.
- Give your child the facts in a simple manner – be careful not to go into too much detail. Your child will ask more questions as they come up in his/her mind.
 - The explanation that worked best for some of our members with young children was that death occurs when someone's body stops working, with reassurance that this will not happen to them and that it usually happens when people are very old.
- Allow your child, however young, to attend the funeral if he or she wants to.
- Convey your spiritual values about life and death with your child.
- Meet regularly as a family to find out how everyone is coping. Talk about feelings, such as: sad, angry, feeling responsible, scared, tearful, depressed, worried, etc.
- Use the given name of the deceased when speaking of him or her.
- Be willing to hear and discuss your child's feelings and encourage him or her to talk about the person who died. Recalling memories (both good ones and not so good ones) might have great value to one child while others might not be ready to talk about the person. Be conscious of their response.
- Write down memories of the child because every single memory you have will be treasured.
- Help children find ways to symbolize and memorialize the deceased person.
- Keep your child's daily routine as normal as possible.
- Pay attention to the way a child plays; this can be one of a child's primary ways of communicating.
- Watch out for "bad dreams." Are they occurring often? Talk about the dreams.
- Watch for behavioral changes in your child both at home or at school.

What not to do

- Don't force a child to publicly mourn if he or she doesn't want to.
- Don't give false or confusing messages, like "Sally went to sleep."
- Don't tell a child to stop crying because others might get upset.
- Don't try to shield a child from the loss. Children pick up on much more than adults realize. Including them in the grieving process will help them adapt and heal.
- Don't stifle your tears; by crying in front of your child, you send the message that it's okay for him or her to express feelings, too. At the same time, try not to sob or lose control in front of your child; it's too scary for him or her.
- Don't turn your child into your personal confidante. Rely on another adult or a support group instead.
- Don't tell a child they have grieved too long or to "get over it."

For additional information on what to say to a grieving child, visit the link [What to Say to Someone Who Has Lost a Loved One](#).

A Few Resources

The following series of books may be a place to start depending on the age of the grieving child.

- *Healing Your Grieving Heart For Teens: 100 Practical Ideas*, by Alan Wolfelt, PH. D. (ISBN 978-1-879651-23-4)
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart For Kids - 100 Practical Ideas*, by Alan Wolfelt, PH. D (ISBN 978-1-879651-27-2)
- *A Child's View of Grief*, by Alan Wolfelt, PH. D (ISBN 978-1879651-43-2)