

# Helping a Child Cope with the Death of a Parent

## Overview

Ways to help a child or teenager cope with the loss of a parent.

- Common ways children respond to a loss
- Tips on helping a child cope with the death of a parent
- Signs that a child is having trouble coping with a loss

Losing a parent is difficult at any age, but for a child the loss can seem almost unbearable. Children get their sense of security from the adults who love and care for them, so the death of a parent can make them feel very afraid and vulnerable even if they aren't old enough to put their feelings into words.

A child's reaction to the death of a parent may be different depending on the age and personality of the child. But children of all ages always need extra love and support after such a painful event. You can help by showing that you understand how much the death hurts and remembering that children, like adults, need to grieve in their own way and on their own timetable.

## Common ways children respond to a loss

Children's reactions to the death of a parent may depend to some extent on their ability to understand the loss and its possible effects on their lives. Here are some common ways that children may respond at different ages.

- *Infants.* Babies and children under the age of 2 don't understand death but can be aware of any changes in their environment. They may become fussy or upset (or you may notice differences in their eating, sleeping, or toileting habits) if they experience changes in their usual routines caused by the loss of a parent.
- *Preschoolers.* Most preschoolers have a limited (if any) idea of death, and many believe in "magical thinking" -- for example, that they can cause someone to die or return to life just by wishing for it. They may even think they caused a parent's death with "bad" thoughts or behavior. Because they depend on their families to meet almost all their needs, they may also worry about who will take care of them or that something will happen to the surviving parent.
- *School-age children.* By the time they start school, most children begin to understand the finality of death. But they may still feel confused about what this means. They may believe death is somehow contagious and worry that they or other members of their family will die. Or they may worry that friends or others will see them as "weird" or "different" because their parent died. School-age children may also feel angry or that they are even responsible for the death.
- *Teenagers.* Teenagers know that everybody dies and that death is permanent. They also have the ability to reason logically and analyze complex situations, so

they may have a lot of questions such as, “Why did such a good person have to die so young?” They also take things very personally and can be very focused on how situations will affect them. They may believe that they caused or contributed to a death in more subtle ways than younger children do -- for example, if they know that stress plays a role in some diseases, they may think they caused the death by upsetting their parent. Or they may feel angry and not know how to express it, particularly with friends who value appearing “cool” at all times.

### **Tips on helping a child cope with the death of a parent**

After the death of a parent, children may experience all the emotions that adults do, including intense shock, numbness, sadness, difficulty accepting the loss, anger, fears about the future, and a sense of guilt or responsibility for the tragedy. Here are some ways to help a child deal with confusing or upsetting feelings:

- *Give children permission to grieve.* Explain that it’s natural to feel sad, to cry, to feel angry, and to think a lot about the person who died. Children may need more attention than usual and extra reassurance that you won’t go away, too.
- *Show your own sadness.* Showing your own grief gives your child ideas on how to express his or her own emotions. You might say, “I miss Daddy a lot today. I need a hug.” But try to avoid outbursts that may heighten a child’s fears, such as uncontrolled anger or tears. If your grief seems unmanageable, talk to a professional as soon as possible.
- *Be direct about what happened.* Especially with younger children, be careful about using phrases like, “We lost Mommy,” “Mommy is at rest,” or “Mommy went away [or went to sleep] forever.” These words may leave the impression that you may find the parent or that the parent will wake up soon. They may also cause a child to become extremely fearful of getting lost or going to sleep.
- *Explain why the parent died.* A clear and simple explanation is best. But remember that preschoolers -- and even some school-age children -- may not understand the difference between minor and fatal illnesses. If you say, “Mommy got very sick and died,” you might add, “Almost everybody gets sick sometimes, but most people get better and live for a long time afterward.”
- *Realize that a suicide presents special challenges.* Young children may have great difficulty understanding suicide, so a simple age-appropriate explanation is best until they are old enough to comprehend the circumstances of the parent’s death more fully. They need reassurance that their parent loved them. If they know that the parent took his or her own life, it’s important to help them talk about their feelings, especially with a professional. Children need to know that their feelings are normal, that no one may ever really be able to understand why the loss occurred, and that not understanding is one of the hardest things for everyone who is grieving.

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- *Think carefully about whether the child should attend the funeral.* Attending a funeral can play a valuable role in helping a child accept the loss of a parent, especially if he is older and wants to attend or take part in the service. But going to a funeral can be traumatic for a child who isn't emotionally ready or who is strongly resistant. Consider the child's wishes and maturity when making this decision. If the child wants to attend, prepare him or her for what might be there, such as a casket, or what might happen, such as memorials or people crying. If the child doesn't want to go, help him or her find another way to "say goodbye" to the parent, such as by lighting a candle, saying a prayer, or writing a poem that can be read by someone else during the service.
- *Offer lots of reassurance.* Tell a grieving child very often that you'll always love and care for him or her. If the child is worried that you'll die too, tell her which family member or family friend would take care of her if that ever happened.
- *Keep up familiar routines.* In difficult times, children find great comfort and security in familiar routines such as sitting down to a family dinner or attending soccer practice every Tuesday. If the death makes some routines harder to continue, try to alter them instead of giving them up. Bring home take-out food instead of cooking every night or see if a friend can help with transportation.
- *Help a child find ways to express painful emotions.* Remember that children may have feelings that they can't put into words. Younger ones may find it easier to express emotions by drawing or painting, making a house for a doll or playing with action figures. An older child or a teenager might like to keep a journal or arrange pictures of the parent in an album. Children of every age can benefit by having new and healthier ways to express emotions -- for example, taking art classes or karate lessons.
- *Read a child books that deal sensitively with death.* Young children can find a safe outlet for complex feelings in books that deal skillfully with loss. Good books for toddlers and preschoolers include *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Wise Brown and *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton. Young school-age children may prefer *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst or *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies* by Janis Silverman. Children of varied ages can identify with the 7- to 17-year-olds who talk about death in *How It Feels When a Parent Dies* by Jill Krementz. All of these books are available at bookstores, libraries, and online.
- *Encourage an older child to explore community and Internet resources.* Some communities have peer-support or other helpful programs for children who have lost a parent. Ask your pediatrician or the pediatrics department of a local hospital about these resources or get in touch with a national organization related to the parent's cause of death, such as the American Cancer Society. Consider encouraging an older child to explore online support groups for adolescents and teenagers who have lost a parent. You can learn about these at [www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org),

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which has links to support groups for young people. This site also has helpful resources for adults.

- *Pay special attention to holidays.* Even children who are coping well with their parent's death may still have difficulty during the first birthdays, holidays, and other events following the death. Mother's Day or Father's Day can be especially poignant when the absence of the parent seems even more painful. Try to help a child find proactive and healthy ways to deal with the grief that may intensify on these occasions. You might want to make a special ornament or decoration in memory of the parent during the holiday season. Or celebrate the holidays with cherished friends or family members who will make an extra effort to reinforce the child's sense of feeling loved and valued. Let the child know it is OK to mention and talk about the parent on holidays as well as any other day of the year.
- *Make extra time for a grieving child.* Your consistent and loving presence may help a grieving child more than any specific thing you do. Spend time each day listening to the child's concerns or participating in an activity that you both enjoy, such as playing catch or a board game or cooking a meal. Making time for a grieving child -- even if he doesn't want to talk about his feelings right now -- lets him know that you'll be there when he needs you or wants to talk.

No matter what steps you take to help your child cope, it's important to consider the circumstances of the death. Children who have lost a parent in a sudden or violent tragedy or who witnessed the death may feel much more traumatized than those who knew for a long time that a parent was sick and might die. If the circumstances of the death were unusual -- or if your child has had other recent losses -- it's a good idea to talk to a professional about what extra steps you can take to make your child feel more safe and secure. You may also want to visit the site for the Hospice Foundation of America [www.hospicefoundation.org](http://www.hospicefoundation.org), which has free information about helping children and adolescents deal with grief.

#### **Signs that a child is having trouble coping with a loss**

For children, as well as for adults, grief tends to ease over time. But some children have more trouble coping than others. Signs of difficulty may include the following:

- a sharp drop in grades or other problems at school
- refusing to go to school or refusing to participate in activities the child used to enjoy
- trouble eating, sleeping, or concentrating
- physical problems for which doctors can find no medical cause
- never or rarely talking about the person who died

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- withdrawing from friends and family members
- only feeling safe when people are around
- going back to behavior that the child had outgrown (such as clinging or bed-wetting in younger children)
- getting into trouble with the police for stealing, vandalism, or other acting out or attention-seeking behavior
- developing anxieties or phobias (such as excessive hand-washing or an intense fear of becoming separated from the surviving parent)
- abusing alcohol or drugs
- frequent angry or emotional outbursts or tantrums
- continual fear of dying or of becoming sick or of others dying or becoming sick

If any of these signs persists for more than a few weeks, talk to a professional such as a pediatrician or therapist, who can help you decide what to do next. You may want to arrange for your child to talk to a counselor or another trusted adviser, such as a clergy member. The program that provided this publication can help refer you to a therapist, as well as suggest other resources.

Remember, in order to help a child recover, you'll also need to make a special effort to take care of yourself. Ask other adults for the kind of support you need, get plenty of rest, maintain your own routines as much as possible, and look into counseling for yourself if you feel you are having difficulty adjusting.

The death of a parent is always extremely painful for a child. But children are resilient, and most go on to lead full and productive lives after a loss. You can help a child recover more quickly and more thoroughly by offering steady and loving support and appropriate resources both in the immediate aftermath of the death and in the months and years ahead.

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