

Helping a child cope with the death of a parent

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Key points to remember

- after a death, many children want to share their story
- telling their story is a healing experience
- one of the best ways adults can help young griever is to listen to their stories
- children also need continuity (normal activities), care (plenty of hugs and cuddles) and connection (to still feel connected to the parent who has died, and to you)

What do bereaved children need?

After a death, many children want to share their story. They may want to tell you what happened, where they were when they were told about the death, and what it was like for them. Telling their story is a healing experience. One of the best ways adults can help young griever is to listen to their stories.

Children also need continuity, care and connection.

Continuity

It is important to maintain normal activities at home, at school and in the community wherever possible. Talk to your child's school and teacher about what has happened as soon as you can so that they are able to provide extra support for your child.

Care

Take time to give your child plenty of hugs and cuddles. Grief can be a very lonely experience for children and adults. It's important that your child continues to feel looked after and cared for. It may help to ask other family members and friends to help you care for your child / children in the weeks following the death, when your own grief is overwhelming.

Connection

When an important family member dies, the whole family can feel fractured and incomplete. It's quite natural to want to withdraw for a while and it is at this time that children can feel lonely and disconnected from their grieving parent. It's important that your child is able to still feel connected to the parent who has died and to you. You can help them to do this in the practical ways listed below.

Specifically, they need:

- adequate information about the death
- their fears and anxieties addressed
- reassurance that they are not to blame
- careful listening
- acknowledgement and acceptance of their feelings and grief
- a sense of safety in the world
- respect for their own way of coping
- people who will guide and help
- help with overwhelming emotions
- involvement and inclusion in rituals and anniversaries
- opportunities to remember the person who has died

Three important questions young children might not ask but you might help to answer

- who will look after me?
- will I get sick?

- did I cause my parent to die?

The death of a parent can shake the foundations of a child's belief in the world as a safe place. Your child will need plenty of reassurance and encouragement to begin to feel safe again. Some children may worry about getting sick and dying themselves and it may reassure them to visit your family doctor for a check-up. It's a good idea to give the doctor a ring before you visit so that they can be prepared for any questions your child may ask.

Communicating with your grieving child

Keeping communication open with children and young people can be the greatest challenge for a grieving caregiver. Children may not necessarily wish to talk but they need to be able to express their grief and sadness. Below are some practical suggestions to help you with this.

How you can help children explore and express their grief?

Talk

Talk about the person who has died and use their name.

Make a memory box

Make a memory store/box and use this to store precious things that offer memories of the parent who has died.

Make photos available

Pool the available photos and make copies for all the children concerned.

Make a photo album and journal

Create an album of photographs and stories. Keep a journal of memories.

Put together questionnaires

Put together questions that build a portrait of the parent. You can ask and answer these together as a family before and/or after the death of a parent. For example:

- what was their favourite food?
- what was their favourite place?
- what was their favourite TV programme?

Link objects and special things

It is important for children to have some of the special objects that belonged to their parent. These might be items of clothing, jewellery or other objects.

Make time to sit down and listen

Your child will talk when they are ready and usually in small bursts. These are precious windows to your child's understanding of what has happened.

Create rituals

Create special and unique rituals or remembrance activities.

When can therapy help?

Children often protect their parents fearing that they will bring further sadness if they express their grief.

Sometimes children experience difficulties with grief and may need professional help. The following are signs that your child may need help. Many of these signs are normal following the death of a parent but may indicate a problem if they continue for a long time and don't seem likely to change.

Difficulty talking

Has continuing difficulty talking about their parent who has died.

Aggression

Is displaying aggressive behaviour and anger.

Physical symptoms

Has unexplained physical symptoms and discomfort such as stomach aches and headaches.

Sleeping and eating problems

Has sleeping difficulties and eating disturbance such as eating excessively or having very little appetite.

Marked social withdrawal

Doesn't want to socialise with friends or others outside the family.

School difficulties

Has serious academic reversal, inability to concentrate or behavioural problems.

Guilt

Has continuing blame or guilt.

Self destructive behaviour

Engages in at-risk behaviour and talks about wanting to hurt themselves.

What therapy offers

Therapy offers the older child or adolescent the opportunity to talk about very difficult things in a safe and non-judgemental environment. The therapist or counsellor may suggest that you come with your children and that you all talk together. Children under about 8 years will need the opportunity for expression that play therapy offers. Remember that very young children and infants are also deeply affected by the loss of a parent although their way of managing the feelings will not always be obvious.

Information about child and family counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists

It is very important to check, and okay to ask, whether the clinician has clinical training and experience in working with children and young people.

How to contact a counsellor, psychotherapist or psychologist

You can contact a counsellor, psychotherapist or psychologist through your family doctor.

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