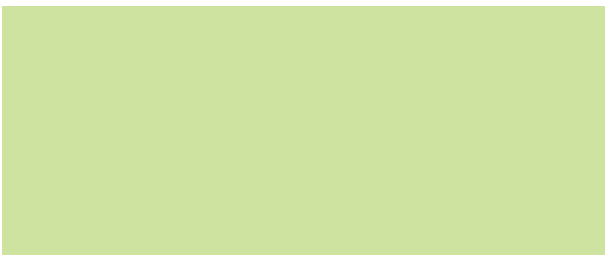
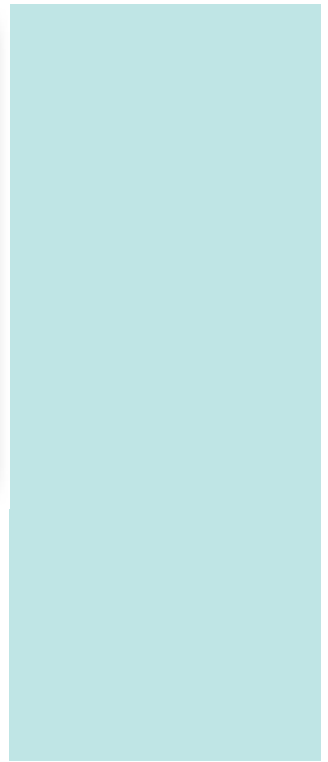


# Supporting Your Grieving Child

## Information for Caregivers



**It can be challenging** as parents to find ourselves grieving the death of an important person while attending to the needs of our children who are also grieving. Balancing your grief needs with those of your child can be especially difficult when you each have different needs at a particular moment. The purpose of this brochure is to help you to identify and understand the needs that your child may have as he/she grieves and to offer some suggestions for responding to him/her.



## **Age Matters!**

How your child understands death, expresses thoughts and feelings, and grieves is influenced by his/her age and developmental level.

### **The Adolescent:**

As children enter adolescence, they may become more frightened by concepts such as forever, infinity, and never. They understand that death is a natural process, but have difficulty fathoming that death will occur to them or their peers. Teenagers tend to value their privacy and prefer to confide in peers rather than parents or teachers. Many teenagers avoid talking to family members about their feelings or about the person who died out of concern for them. (“Whenever I mention \_\_\_\_\_ (the person who died), Mom cries. I don’t want her to feel worse, so I just don’t mention him.”) Let your teenager know that you want to know how he/she is doing and that you will be okay, even if you cry. You may be tempted to act as if everything is okay so as not to upset your child, but when you are honest about your feelings with your child, you are teaching him/her that feelings are normal and okay to express.

### **The Young Child:**

School aged children are usually very curious and interested in details. They can accept that death is permanent and have their own ideas and thoughts about death, dying, and an afterlife, as well as possibly their own fears about death. They may be preoccupied with questions about the condition of the body at the time of death, the details about what happened to the person who died, and about what will happen at the funeral or memorial service. You may find yourself explaining and re-explaining the same information many times as your child works to understand his/her experience.

### **The Preschool Child:**

Preschool children will usually see death as temporary and reversible - the person who died will come back and life will go back to the way it was. You may find yourself feeling frustrated by having to explain that the person who died will not be returning, by answering the same questions many times or by seeing your child express anger or frustration with the person who died for not coming back. Providing responses with patience that include, "I am sad Daddy died, too," can help your child begin to understand the feelings that emerge as he/she grieves.

### **The Grieving Child:**

Children usually grieve in small doses or spurts. They may feel emotional for a brief time then want to switch to a more enjoyable activity, like play or socializing with peers. When this happens, adults may conclude that the child is "over" his/her grief experience. This is not usually the case.

Some children express their sadness as anger. You may see an increase in acting out behaviors and lowered tolerance for frustration. Some will regress to earlier behaviors (wetting the bed, wanting more comfort or reassurance) as their sense of security has been shaken.

## Supporting Your Grieving Child:

Safety and security needs are of primary importance to the grieving child. Children will worry about who will take care of them, especially if they have encountered a parent loss. While you cannot promise that you will not die, you can speak of your intent to care for your child and to keep him/her safe.

**Take time to talk and listen.** Doing so will reassure your child that his/her relationship with you is important to you and communicates that he/she is important. Your child may not have the words to describe or discuss how he/she feels, so talking about feelings may be very difficult. You can help by using feeling words to describe your child's feelings as well as your own feelings.

**Questions!** Your child may have or ask a lot of questions in an effort to understand the death or his/her own experiences. What you say in response to those questions matters. *How* you say your responses matters more. Get on the child's level, use a calm voice, use eye contact. Treating your child's questions and feelings with respect is more important than having the "right answer." What your child seeks is reassurance more than specific answers to his/her questions.

**Encourage children to express their grief.** Some children will want to talk, others will want to use music, art, play, or movement to explore and express their feelings and memories. Young children may not have the language skills to describe their feelings, needs or wants, but can use drawing, painting and play as ways to express themselves.

# Responding to Questions:

When someone important to your child dies, he/she may ask a lot of questions. Examples of common questions the grieving child may ask and the possible thinking behind them include:

## **“Who else will die?”**

A child may be concerned about his/her own safety & security, or may cling to the surviving parent, fearful of his/her death.

## **“Who will take care of me?”**

This is especially relevant if one parent has already died. A supportive response to this question is, “You are wondering what will happen to you.”

## **“Why?”**

To validate the child’s pain, a supportive response is, “That’s a good question. I have wondered that too.”

## **“Is it my fault?”**

While we are tempted to respond with, “No,” this type of response shuts down the conversation related to what the child is thinking or feeling. Instead, respond with, “It feels like it was your fault,” or “You are wondering if you could have done something differently.”

## **“Is it my responsibility to take care of the family now?”**

Although children may have to help out more, they are still children. Sometimes, however, a death will cause family members to take on additional responsibilities. Talking to your child about the changes can be helpful.

# What can you do to help?

**Be honest with your words.** Children will be less confused and more open to talking about their experiences if accurate words are used, for example, “I am sad that Father died.”

**Plan for your child’s return to school.** Going back to school after a death can be very difficult for a child who is grieving. Facing other students, concentrating on school work, and going through typical routines can present special challenges. You can help by:

- discussing with your child any special requests he/she might have for talking with teachers and other students. (Does he/she want others to know? Does he/she want to be part of the discussion about what happened?)
- developing a plan with your child and his/her teachers for when your child might become upset and unable to remain in the classroom. Include in that plan: where to go, how to communicate the need to go to that place, who the people are the child is willing to talk to when he/she becomes upset at school, and how to communicate to the teacher the need to complete an alternate activity.
- working out a plan if your child has difficulty keeping up with schoolwork.
- discussing how to handle questions that friends and teachers might ask or comments they may make.
- making plans with school personnel to handle celebrations and activities that might be especially difficult for your child, such as holidays, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and anniversary dates.

# Grief is a Process, not an Event!

***Consider holidays and special events.*** Anniversaries, times of significant events, or milestones may be stressful throughout the child's life. During these times you may observe a return of grief responses. Each person's grief journey will be unique to him or her.

***Commemorations should consider and include the children.*** Commemorations can be important to children of all ages. Involve them in the various types of commemoration activities that take place in the family: funerals, scholarship funds, memorial events, planting a special tree, making a memory book, making a special meal together in memory of the person who died on a special anniversary.

***There is no time frame for grieving.*** Grief can come in spurts, feelings can come and go, but each person's grief journey is unique and impacted by other losses and grief experiences that one may have had. Your child can have "good days" followed by more difficult days. This is typical and can be confusing for the child who is going through it, as well as for those who are offering support.

***Grief is grief.*** It can be tempting to judge or evaluate whether someone's grief is legitimate based on the relationship between the one who is grieving and the person who died. A recent death can stir up thoughts and feelings from a previous death in one's life. Your child might be struggling with understanding how "bad things happen to good people," how God can allow bad things to happen, or other questions that have no answers.

# Signs that additional assistance/referral is needed

A child who:

- is depressed or withdrawn;
- begins or resumes cutting;
- shows aggression or has frequent emotional outbursts;
- makes verbal or written statements that suggest the child is at risk to harm self or others;
- has auditory or visual hallucinations;
- is using drugs or alcohol;
- shows dark content in assignments or creative projects;
- has experienced multiple losses in a relatively short period of time;
- has an adult caregiver who is overwhelmed by grief and who may be unable to attend to the child's grief journey as well.



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