

Helping Children after a Death

For Parents

1) Be honest and straightforward about what happened

Withholding information or giving only partial truths can cause children to distrust adults when they learn the truth.

2) Give only information that children want to know

Too much information can make children confused. They will ask more questions as they are ready if you create an atmosphere where questions are welcome.

3) Explain the cause of death

Young children often believe that something they did, said, or thought caused the death.

4) Show extra affection

Most grieving children need extra affection for comfort. If teens don't want hugs or snuggles, touch them in other ways (e.g., a hand on the shoulder). It is common for teens to be drawn to fighting or sexual activity to meet their affection needs.

5) Talk about who will care for them if their caregiver dies

After a parent/caregiver's death, most children worry about what will happen to them if the remaining caregiver dies as well.

6) Avoid euphemisms

Young children don't understand abstract terms about death like, "we lost her" or "she passed away." Use the "D" word.

7) Accept regression without criticism

Children may start exhibiting behaviors they previously mastered. This is normal and temporary and should be accepted without criticism.

8) Include children

Adults often want to protect children from participating in death rituals (viewing, funeral, etc.). This is often a reflection of the adult's discomfort rather than the child's. Let children know what to expect and then give them the choice about participating.

9) Model healthy ways of expressing feelings

Children will take cues from adults about how to grieve. Model how to express grief and pain in healthy and helpful ways. Learn together how to calm your bodies in various ways (see [Calming Exercises](#)). Talk about strengths that will help you heal.

10) Talk with children before holidays and special days

Children often want to continue observing holidays and other special days while adults often prefer to avoid them. Make a plan with them before each significant day. Talk about which traditions you want to keep or change.