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## When a Loved One Dies: How to Help Your Child

When a loved one dies, children feel and show their grief in different ways. How kids cope with the loss depends on things like their age, how close they felt to the person who died, and the support they receive.

Here are some things parents can do to help a child who has lost a loved one:

**Use simple words to talk about death.** Be calm and caring when you tell your child that someone has died. Use words that are clear and direct. "I have some sad news to tell you. Grandma died today." Pause to give your child a moment to take in your words.

**Listen and comfort.** Every child reacts in their own way when they learn that a loved one has died. Some kids cry. Some ask questions. Others seem not to react at all. That's OK. Stay with your child to offer hugs or comfort. Answer your child's questions. Or just be together for a few minutes. It's OK if your child sees your sadness or tears.

**Put feelings into words.** Ask kids to say what they're thinking and feeling. Label some of your own feelings. This makes it easier for kids to share theirs. Say things like, "I know you're feeling very sad. I'm sad, too. We both loved Grandma so much, and she loved us too."

**Tell your child what to expect.** If the death of a loved one means changes in your child's life or routine, explain what will happen. This helps your child feel prepared. For example, "Aunt Sara will pick you up from school like Grandma used to." Or, "I need to stay with Grandpa for a few days. That means you and Dad will be home taking care of each other. But I'll talk to you every day, and I'll be back on Sunday."

**Explain events that will happen.** Allow children to join in rituals like viewings, funerals, or memorial services. Tell them ahead of time what will happen. For example, "Lots of people who loved Grandma will be there. We will sing, pray, and talk about Grandma's life. People might cry and hug. They might say to us, 'I'm sorry for your loss.' We can say, 'Thank you,' or 'Thanks for coming.' You can stay near me and hold my hand if you want."

You might need to explain burial or cremation. For example, "After the funeral, there is a burial at a cemetery. The person's body is in a casket (or coffin) that gets buried in the ground with a special ceremony. This can feel like a sad goodbye, and people might cry." Share your family's beliefs about what happens to a person's soul or spirit after death.

Explain what will happen after the service, too. For example, "We all will go eat food together. People will laugh, talk, and hug some more. Talking about happy times with Grandma and being together helps people start to feel better."

**Give your child a role.** Having a small, active role lets kids feel part of things and helps them cope. You might invite your child to read a poem, pick a song to be played, gather some photos to display, or make something. Let kids decide if they want to take part, and how.

**Help your child remember the person.** In the days and weeks ahead, encourage your child to draw pictures or write down stories of their loved one. Don't avoid talking about the person who died. Sharing happy memories helps heal grief.

**Give comfort and reassure your child.** Notice if your child seems sad, worried, or upset in other ways. Ask about feelings and listen. Let your child know that it takes time to feel better after a loved one dies. Some kids may have trouble sleeping or have fears or worries. Let kids know these things will get better. Give them extra time and care. Support groups and counseling can help kids who need more support.

**Help your child feel better.** Provide the comfort your child needs but don't dwell on sad feelings. After a few minutes of talking and listening, shift to an activity or topic that helps your child feel a little better. Play, make art, cook, or go somewhere together.

**Give your child time to heal from the loss.** Grief is a process that happens over time. Be sure to talk often and listen to see how your child is feeling and doing. Healing doesn't mean forgetting about your loved one. It means remembering the person with love. Loving memories stir good feelings that support us as we go on to enjoy life.

**Get more help if needed.** If a loved one's death was sudden, deeply stressful, or violent, a child may need therapy to help them heal. If your child's distress lasts for more than a few weeks, or if you think your family needs more help, talk with your child's doctor. They can help you find the right therapist to work with.

**Reviewed by:** D'Arcy Lyness, PhD

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