# After a Loved One Dies—How Children Grieve

## And how parents and other adults can support them

# After a Loved One Dies—How Children Grieve

## And how parents and other adults can support them

Written by David J. Schonfeld, MD
and Marcia Quackenbush, MS, MFT, CHES

Dr. Schonfeld is Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, which was established by a generous grant from the September 11th Children's Fund and National Philanthropic Trust.
www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis

Copyright © 2009 New York Life Foundation. Permission is granted for educational and non-profit use of these materials, with acknowledgment. All other rights reserved. Published by the New York Life Foundation, 51 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10010.
email: NYLFoundation@newyorklife.com

This publication was supported by a generous grant from the New York Life Foundation.

**The information contained in this booklet is not intended as a substitute for your health professional's opinion or care. You and your children have unique needs which may not be addressed in this booklet. If you have concerns, be sure to seek professional advice.**

Dear Reader,

Protecting families and providing them financial security is at the heart of New York Life's mission. But we also recognize the tremendous emotional toll suffered by family members – especially children – when they lose a parent, sibling or other loved one.

We believe this informative booklet can be of value to parents and other caregivers as they help children cope with their grief and fear following a death in the family. It was prepared with the assistance of some of the nation's most respected authorities on this important topic. I think you will find their suggestions sensible and their wisdom reassuring.

Helping young people grieve, heal and grow is part of New York Life's long-term philanthropic commitment to assisting children in need.

I wish you the comfort that can be found in helping young hearts heal.

Theodore A. Mathas

**Chairman, President and CEO**
**New York Life**

# After a Loved One Dies—How Children Grieve

## And how parents and other adults can support them

### What's Covered in this Guide


- **Helping children, helping the family** pg 1
- **Why a parent's role is important** pg 2
- **Helping children understand death** pg 3
- **How children respond to death** pg 7
- **Attending funerals and memorials** pg 14
- **Helping children cope over time** pg 16
- **Getting help** pg 21
- **Taking care of yourself** pg 24
- **Looking to the future** pg 26

When children get support from parents and other adults around them, it helps the entire family cope.

## Helping Children, Helping the Family

**The death of a loved one is difficult for everyone.** Children feel the loss strongly. Parents are coping with their own grief. If a parent dies, the surviving parent faces the new responsibility of caring for the children alone. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and family friends are affected too.

Because children and teens understand death differently from adults, their reactions may be different. Some of the things they say or do may seem puzzling.

This guide reviews how children grieve and how parents and other caring adults can help them understand death better. It offers suggestions for helping children cope. These suggestions are not meant to rush children through their grief or turn them into adults before their time. Rather, they will give them an understanding they can use now, as children, to grieve in a healthy and meaningful way.

When children get support from parents and other adults around them, it helps the entire family cope. There is less confusion, and more understanding of one another. The family sees that it can stay close even though the feelings of grief might be very strong.

### How to Use This Guide

This guide covers a lot of information. Some of it will apply to your situation, and some of it may not. You can read just the sections that seem most important to you right now. As things change or new situations come up, you may want to read the other sections.

**Note:** In this guide, "children" refers to children of all ages, including teens, except when talking about a specific age.

### Other Caring Adults

**This guide is geared toward parents and family, but others who work with children may also find it useful. Teachers, coaches, childcare providers and other caring adults can offer better support to a child who has lost a loved one when they understand more about how children grieve.**

# Why a Parent's Role Is Important

**Your children are experiencing powerful and difficult feelings.** They want guidance about what these feelings mean and how to cope. More than anyone else in their lives, they look to you for that guidance.

Your children are concerned for you too. They wonder how you are coping. They may also worry about your health and survival. Your support and reassurance are most important for them, and can have more impact than anyone else's.

## When a Parent is Grieving

**Talking with your children about a death is especially difficult when you're dealing with your own grief.** Children often ask the same questions adults ask themselves at such times: How could something this unfair happen? How can I go on if I will never get to see this person again? Who wants to live in a world where this can occur? What's going to become of our family now that this person is gone?

Especially in these difficult moments, your love and support are very important to your children. They learn how to deal with their grief by watching what you do to cope. However, if the task of explaining death feels overwhelming to you right now, you may want to have someone else assist you with the discussion. Think about giving that person this guide to read.

You can still have these conversations with your children when you are ready. They will need to discuss this more than once, and it will matter to them because it comes from you.

More than anyone else in their lives, they look to you for guidance.

## Helping Children Understand Death

**Children see and hear many of the same things adults do. However, their understanding of what these things mean may be quite different.** This is true with death. Adults can help children understand death accurately. This involves more than simply giving them the facts. It means helping them grasp some important new concepts.

Support of this type allows children to understand and adjust to the loss fully as they continue to move forward in their lives.

### Four Basic Concepts About Death

Everyone, including children, must understand four basic concepts about death to grieve fully and come to terms with what has happened. Teens, and even adults, may have a full and rational understanding of death, yet still struggle to accept these basic concepts when faced with the death of a loved one. It is even harder for young children who do not yet understand the concepts to cope with a loss.

There is wide variation in how well children of the same age understand death based on what they have experienced and the things they have already learned about it.

Don't assume what your children know based on their age. Instead, ask them to talk about their ideas, thoughts and feelings. As they explain what they already understand about death, you'll be able to see what they still need to learn. Even toddlers can begin to understand some of these basic concepts.

## 1. Death is irreversible.

In cartoons, television shows and movies, children see characters "die" and then come back to life. In real life, this is not going to happen.

Children who don't fully understand this concept may view death as a kind of temporary separation. They often think of people who have died as being far away, perhaps on a trip. Sometimes adults reinforce this belief by talking about the person who died as having "gone on a long journey." Children may feel angry when their loved one doesn't call or return for important occasions.

If children don't think of the death as permanent, they have little reason to begin to mourn. Mourning is a painful process that requires people to adjust their ties to the person who has died. An essential first step in this process is understanding and, at some level, accepting that the loss is permanent.

## 2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.

Very young children view all things as living—their sister, a toy, the mean rock that just "tripped" them. In day-to-day conversations, adults may add to this confusion by talking about the child's doll being hungry or saying they got home late because the car "died."

Imaginative play with children is natural and appropriate. But, while adults understand that there's a difference between pretending a doll is hungry and believing the doll is hungry, this difference may not be clear to a very young child.

Young children are sometimes encouraged to talk to a family member who has died. They may be told their loved one is "watching over them" from heaven. Sometimes children are asked to draw a picture or write a note to the person who died that can be placed in the coffin.

These comments can be confusing and even frightening to some children. If the person who has died could read a note, does it mean he or she will be aware of being in the coffin? Will the person realize he or she has been buried?

Children may know that people can't move after they've died, but believe this is because the coffin is too small. They may know people can't see after death, but believe this is because it is dark underground. These children may become preoccupied with the physical suffering of the deceased.

When children can correctly identify what living functions are, they can also understand that these functions end completely at the time of death. For example, only living things can think, be afraid, be hungry or feel pain. Only living things have a beating heart, or need air to breathe.

## 3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.

Children may believe that they and others close to them will never die. Parents often reassure children that they will always be there to take care of them. They tell them not to worry about dying themselves. This wish to shield children from death is understandable. But when a death directly affects children, this reality can no longer be hidden from them. When a parent or other significant person has died, children will usually fear that others close to them—perhaps everyone they care about—will also die.

Children, just like adults, struggle to make sense of a death. If they do not understand that death is an inevitable part of life, they will make mistakes as they figure out why this particular death occurred. They may assume it happened because of something bad they did or something they failed to do. They may think it happened because of bad thoughts they had. This leads to guilt. They may assume the person who died did or thought bad things, or didn't do something he or she should have done. This leads to shame.

These reactions make it difficult for children to adjust to the loss. Many children don't want to talk about the death because it will expose these terrible feelings of guilt and shame.

When you talk to your children about this concept, let them know you are well, and that you are doing everything you can to stay healthy. Explain that you hope and expect to live a very long time, until your children are adults. This is different from telling children that you or they will never die.

## 4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

Children must understand why their loved one died. If children don't understand the real reason their loved one has died, they are more likely to come up with explanations that cause guilt or shame.

The goal is to help children feel they understand what has happened. Offer a brief explanation, using simple and direct language. Take your cues from your children, and allow them to ask for further explanations. Graphic details aren't necessary and should be avoided, especially if the death was violent.

Talking with your children provides a chance for them to show you their feelings.

## Explaining Death to Children

**Sometimes, children don't react to news of a death the way their parents and other adults expect them to. There are many ways explanations about death can confuse children.**

**Explanations and terms may not be clear.** Adults often choose words they feel are gentler or less frightening for children. They might avoid using the words "dead" or "died," which seem harsh at such an emotional time.

But, with these less direct terms, children may not understand what the adult is saying. For example, if an adult tells children that their loved one is now in a state of "eternal sleep," the children may become afraid to go to sleep.

### What to Do

**Speak gently, but frankly and directly to children. Use the words "dead" and "died."**

**Children may only understand part of the explanation.** Even when adults give clear, direct explanations, children may not fully understand. For example, some children who have been told that the body was placed in a casket worry about where the head has been placed.

### What to Do

**Check back with your children to see what they understand.** You might say, "Let me see if I've explained this well. Please tell me what you understand has happened."

**Religious concepts may be confusing.** It is appropriate to share the family's religious beliefs with children when a death has occurred, but remember that religious beliefs may be abstract and difficult for children to understand.

### What to Do

**Present the facts about what happens to the physical body,** as well as the religious beliefs held by the family.

For example, children might first be told that the person has died. His or her body no longer thinks, feels or sees. The person's entire body has been placed in a casket and buried. In some faiths, the adult might then explain that there is a special part of the person that cannot be seen or touched, which some people call the spirit or soul, and that this part continues on in a place we cannot see or visit, which is called heaven.

## How Children Respond to Death

**Children's reactions to a death may communicate their thoughts, feelings and fears.** Sometimes these reactions are confusing to adults. But, when adults understand what children are communicating, everything makes more sense.

### Here are some common reactions children may have.

**Children may become upset by these discussions.** Keep in mind that it isn't the conversation causing distress, but the very painful loss felt from the death of a loved one. Talking with your children provides a chance for them to show you their feelings. When you understand their feelings, it's easier to help them cope with the experience.

#### What to Do

**Pause the conversation if that seems best.** Provide support and comfort. Plan to continue the talk another time soon.

**Let your children know it's OK to show their feelings.** Otherwise, they might try to hide their feelings and deal with them without your support. Let them know it's OK to cry. Crying may help them feel better.

**Show them your own feelings.** Demonstrate how you are coping. Let your children see you crying, talking with friends, seeking spiritual comfort or remembering good things about the person who has died.

**Children may be reluctant to talk about a recent death.** Often this happens because they see that the adults around them are uncomfortable talking about the death. Children may withhold their own comments or questions to avoid upsetting family members. They may believe it's wrong to talk about such things. Older children and teens may turn to peers to discuss the death. They may tell adults close to them that they don't want or need to talk about it.

### What to Do

**Avoid forcing the issue or getting into power struggles about it.**

**Continue to invite your children to talk on several occasions over time.**

**Acknowledge that these conversations can be difficult.** Let your children know you find talking helpful.

**Help older children and teens identify other adults in their lives with whom they can talk.** Look for people who are not as directly affected by the death, such as a teacher, chaplain, school counselor, mental health professional, or a pediatrician or other health care provider.

**Maintain an emotional and physical presence with your children.** Hug them. Talk about your feelings. Ask about theirs. Even older children and teens need your support and assistance as they cope with the loss.

**Children may express their feelings in ways other than talking.** Children may use play or creative activities such as drawing or writing to express their grief. Often, they come to a better understanding of grief through play and creativity. These expressions can give you some important clues about what children are thinking, but be careful not to jump to conclusions. For example, very happy drawings after a traumatic death might give adults the idea that a child is not affected by the death when, in fact, this is more likely a sign that the child is not yet ready to deal with the grieving process.

Children may use play or creative activities such as drawing or writing to express their grief.

## What to Do

**Offer your children opportunities to play,** write, draw, paint, dance, make up songs or do other creative activities.

**Ask them to tell you about their artwork.** For example, you might say, "Tell me what's happening in this picture you drew." If there are people in the drawing, ask who they are, what they're feeling, whether anyone is missing from the picture, and so on.

**If you're worried that your children's play or creative work shows they are having trouble coping with the death, seek outside help.** (See the section "Getting Help" on page 21.)

Comfort Zone Camp

Children and teens usually wonder if there is something they could have done, or should have done, to prevent the death.

**Children often feel guilty after a death has occurred.** Young children have a limited understanding of why things happen as they do. They often use a process called magical thinking. This means they believe their own thoughts, wishes and actions can make things happen in the greater world. Adults may reinforce this misconception when they suggest that children make a wish for something they want to happen.

Magical thinking is useful at times. Being able to wish for things to be better in their lives and in the world can help young children feel stronger and more in control. But there's also a downside, because when something bad happens, such as the death of a loved one, children may believe it happened because of something they said, did, thought or wished.

Older children and teens also usually wonder if there is something they could have done, or should have done, to prevent the death. For example, the parent wouldn't have had a heart attack if the child hadn't misbehaved and caused stress in the family. The car crash wouldn't have happened if the child didn't need to be picked up after school. The cancer wouldn't have progressed if the child had just made sure the loved one had seen a doctor.

Children may feel guilty for surviving the death of a sibling. They may also feel guilty if they are having fun or not feeling very sad after a family member has died.

## When Guilt Is More Likely

**Children are most likely to feel guilty when there have been challenges in the relationship with the person who died, or in the circumstances of the death. Here are some examples:**

- **The child was angry with the person just before the person died.**
- **The death occurred after a long illness, and, at times, the child may have wished the person would die to end everyone's suffering.**
- **Some action of the child seems related to the death. For example, a teen got into a heated argument with his mother shortly before she died in a car crash.**

When talking with children about the death of someone close, it's appropriate to assume that some sense of guilt may be present. This will usually be the case even if there is no logical reason for the children to feel responsible.

### What to Do

**Explain that when painful or "bad" things happen, people often wonder if it was because they did something bad.**

**Reassure your children that they are not responsible for the death**, even if they haven't asked about this directly.

**Children often express anger about the death.** They may focus on someone they feel is responsible. They may feel angry at God. They may feel angry at the person who died for leaving them. Family members sometimes become the focus of this anger, because they are near and are "safe" targets.

Encourage your children to talk with someone they trust.

Comfort Zone Camp

**Older children and teens may engage in risky behaviors.** They may drive recklessly, get into fights, drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes or use drugs. They may become involved in sexual activity or delinquency. They may start to have problems at school or conflicts with friends.

## What to Do

**Allow children to express their anger.** Avoid being critical about these feelings. Recognize that anger is a normal and natural response.

**Help children identify appropriate ways to express their anger.** Encourage them to talk about it with someone they trust. Suggest that they do something physical, such as running, sports, dancing or yard work, or express the anger through creative activities, such as writing or art.

**Set limits on inappropriate behaviors.** It's not OK for children to hit or hurt others, or for teens to put themselves or others at risk in dangerous situations.

**Children may appear to think only about themselves when confronted with a death.** At the best of times, children are usually most concerned with the things that affect them personally. At times of stress, such as after the death of someone they care about, they may appear even more self-centered.

At a time of tragedy, we often expect children to rise to the occasion and act more "grown-up." It's true that children who have coped with difficult events often emerge with greater maturity. But, in the moment itself, most children, and even adults, may act less maturely.

**Under stress, children may behave as they did at a younger age.** For example, children who have recently mastered toilet training may start to have accidents. Children who have been acting with greater independence may become clingy or have difficulty with separation.

Children and teens can also act less mature socially. They may become demanding, refuse to share, or pick fights with family members. They may respond to the death in ways that seem cold or selfish: "Does this mean I can't have my birthday party this weekend?" "Am I still going to be able to go to the college I want?"

Expect your children to think more about themselves when they are grieving, at least at first. Once they feel their needs are being met, they will be able to think more about the needs of others.

### What to Do

**Continue to show caring and concern for your children.**

**Remember that your children are still grieving,** even when they behave in these ways.

**Set appropriate limits on behavior,** but resist the temptation to accuse children of being selfish or uncaring.

## Parents Have These Feelings Too

**Parents have many of these same feelings—guilt, anger, confusion, feeling needy or less comfortable doing things on their own. They often want to keep their children nearby at these times, so they can be sure their children are safe. They may look to their children to help them make decisions or provide them with support.**

**These are natural and appropriate feelings. But it's also important for parents to step back when their children want or need to be more independent. This may happen soon after the death, or several weeks later. Parents also should be careful about giving children responsibilities that would be more appropriate for adults or about asking children to fill the roles of the adult who died.**

## Attending Funerals and Memorials

**When a close friend or relative has died, children should be offered the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service whenever possible.** Family members sometimes worry that a funeral will be frightening for the children, or that they will not understand what is happening.

But when children are not allowed to attend services, they often create fantasies far more frightening than what actually occurs. They are likely to wonder, "What can they possibly be doing with my mother that is so awful I'm not allowed to see?" They may also feel hurt if they are not included in this important family event. They lose an opportunity to feel the comfort of spiritual and community support provided through services.

You can take steps before, during and after the service to help your children benefit.

**Explain what will happen.** In simple terms, let your children know what to expect. Where will the service take place? Who will be there? Will there be music?

Describe what people will do at the service. Will guests be crying? Will people share stories? Will people be very serious, or will there be laughter?

Talk about the specific features of the service. Will there be a casket? Will it be an open casket? Will there be a funeral procession or a graveside service?

**Answer questions.** Encourage your children to ask any questions before the service. Check in with them more than once on this.

Children should be offered the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service.

**Let your children decide whether or not to attend.** You can let them know that you'd like them to be there, but don't ask them to participate in any ritual or activity they find frightening or unpleasant. Let them know that they can leave at any point or just take a break for a few minutes.

**Find an adult to be with each child.** Especially for young children and preteens, find an adult who can stay with each child throughout the service. This person can answer questions, provide comfort and give the child attention. Ideally, this will be someone the child knows and likes, such as a babysitter or neighbor, who isn't as directly affected by the death. This allows the adult to focus on the child's needs, including leaving the service if the child wishes.

**Allow options.** Younger children might want to play quietly in the back of the sanctuary, which can still give them a sense of having participated in the ritual in a direct way. Older children or teens may want to invite a close friend to sit with them in the family section.

**Offer a role in the service.** It may be helpful for children to have a simple task, such as handing out memorial cards or helping to choose flowers or a favorite song for the service. It's important to suggest something that will comfort and not overwhelm the children.

**Check in afterward.** Be sure to speak to your children after the service and offer them your comfort and love. Over the next few days, ask what they thought of the service. Do they have any feelings they want to share or questions to ask? Are themes from the service showing up in their play or drawings?

No child is too young to be affected by the death of someone close. Even infants respond to a death.

## Helping Children Cope Over Time

**Grief is not a quick process.** People who've lost a family member generally feel that loss throughout their lives. To continue giving your children support, it's important to understand how they may cope with their grief over time.

**No child is too young to be affected by the death of someone close.** Even infants respond to a death. They miss the familiar presence of a parent who has died. They sense powerful emotions around them, and notice changes in feeding and caregiving routines.

Young children can grieve deeply, even though they may not appear to be doing so. They don't usually sustain strong emotions the way adults do. They may visit their concerns briefly, and then turn to play or schoolwork. This helps them avoid being overwhelmed, but doesn't necessarily mean their concerns have been addressed.

Older children and teens may try to focus their attention on schoolwork, sports or hobbies. They may assume more responsibilities at home by helping their parents or other children in the family. Encourage your children to continue their friendships with peers and the activities they enjoyed prior to the death. Even after the death of a family member, it's important for children to keep being children.

Here are some ways adult family and friends can support children over time.

**Help children preserve—and create—memories.** Children sometimes worry that they will forget the person who died, especially if they were quite young at the time of the death. The entire family can keep the person's memory alive through stories, pictures and continued mention of the person in everyday conversation.

Parents can model ways to talk about the person who died and make his or her memory a part of holidays and other special occasions. Finding ways to recognize and remember what was valuable in the relationship with the person who died is part of the healing process.

Children often like to have physical reminders of the person who has died. Some children want to carry a picture or object that reminds them of their family member or keep it in a special place in the home. They may keep clothing or a pillow in their room that still has the person's scent on it.

Children sometimes worry that they will forget the person who died.

**Anticipate grief triggers.** Memories and feelings of grief can be triggered by anniversaries or other important events. The first holiday after the death, the first birthday, the first start of school, a father-daughter dance—any of these might bring up sudden and powerful feelings of sadness.

Everyday events can have an impact as well—a favorite song may come on the radio, a favorite dish might be on the menu at a restaurant, a child might come across an old card from the family member who died. These grief triggers often catch people off guard. They can be troubling to children who are trying hard not to think about the person who died.

Help your children understand that these experiences are natural. They will happen less frequently over time, but may continue to be powerful.

**Talk to your children's teachers.** After a death, children often have difficulty concentrating on their schoolwork. They may benefit from tutoring, support or temporary changes in test schedules or other classroom demands.

Don't wait until school problems start. Talk to your children's teachers and other key people at the school, such as coaches, band directors and club sponsors. Describe the loss your family has experienced. By requesting the support of your children's school early on, you're taking steps that can prevent problems from starting.

By requesting the support of your children's school early on, you're taking steps that can prevent problems from starting.

You may want to talk to the school counselor as well. Even if children don't want to see the counselor, he or she can act as a resource and may be able to help if a situation comes up during the course of the school day that upsets your children or triggers a grief reaction. Counselors can also facilitate planning with classroom teachers.

Talk with the school again when your children change schools or start a new year with new teachers.

**Talk to your children's health care provider.** After a death has occurred, children often worry about their own health and that of others in their family. They are also experiencing greater stress than usual, which can cause a range of physical symptoms, including headaches and stomach aches.

Your children's pediatrician or other health care provider can help identify physical complaints that stem from physical illness, emotional distress or a combination of the two. Health care providers can also direct you to community resources that help support families experiencing grief, such as bereavement support groups or camps for children who've experienced a similar loss. A health care provider may offer to talk with your children to see what they understand about these events. Sometimes he or she can help children express concerns they may be withholding from the family.

**Recognize that grieving can last a lifetime, but should not consume a life.** Children grieve in stages and over many years. At each new stage in their lives, such as when they graduate from school, leave home to go to college, get married, have their own children, or reach the age when a parent died, they will have new skills in thinking and relating to others. They will use these skills to reach a more satisfying explanation of this death. They will build an ever-deeper understanding of its impact on their lives.

In many ways, the work of making meaning from a death never really ends. But, over time, this work becomes less difficult and takes less energy. It may start as a full-time job. Later, it becomes more of a part-time effort that allows other meaningful work and experiences to occur.

Parents often wonder when it's time to encourage children to move on with their lives. Shortly after a death, many children find they are ready to resume their normal day-to-day lives. They find comfort and support in returning to school, spending time with friends and taking part in the activities they did before the death occurred.

However, some children will take longer to get back to their regular daily tasks. They may wish to stay home from school. Sometimes they worry that harm will come to other family members if they aren't there. Some children stay home because they believe the surviving family members need them nearby. Give your children encouragement. They need to know you are OK, and that you expect and want them to return to school and their other daily activities.

Children often need extra support and attention for a period of time.

Children  may worry that both parents will die and leave them alone. At these times, children may find comfort in knowing that, even if this highly unlikely event occurred, the family has a plan about who would take care of them. Consider sharing this plan with your children if they express such concerns.

Children often need extra support and attention for a period of time. They might want help with homework because they are having trouble concentrating and learning. You may want to help set up some social time with friends, such as an outing to the park or a trip to the movies.

Getting back to school and a regular routine is important for your children's health and enables them to move along in their grieving process. In general, if children are having trouble getting back to usual routines after several weeks, it's a good idea to seek outside advice. Check with your children's health care provider or school counselor.

# Getting Help

**At times of loss, parents do not have to handle all of their children's needs on their own.** There is help available. Because parents are often dealing with their own powerful grief, it's especially important for families to reach out for broader support.

## Professional Resources

- **Your children's teacher or school counseling services**
- **A pediatrician or other health care provider**
- **Bereavement support groups for families and children**
- **Community-based mental health services**
- **Special camp programs for children who have had a family member die**
- **Hospice programs**

If you believe your children are having difficulty moving forward in the grieving process, or if you simply have questions, one of these resources will be helpful. It's also useful to reach out to other people who care about you and allow them to help. This shows your children that it's OK to ask for and accept support from others.

## How Others Can Help

Many people may want to provide assistance to you and your children, but not know how. They may avoid talking about the death because of their discomfort. They may say or do things that aren't helpful, even though they mean well.

Consider showing these people the guidelines on page 23. These are ways they can offer assistance that will truly support you and your children.

Here are some ideas for you when you're talking with people who want to help.

**Let them know what they can do.** Be specific. "Drive my daughter to softball practice." "Do the laundry." "Bring us a meal next Wednesday."

**Set limits when you need to.** It's fine to say, "I appreciate your offer to help, but right now I prefer to spend time alone with my children. I'll call you back when it's a good time for me to talk."

**Use an intermediary.** Ask someone to organize helpers.

**Make a "wish list."** Write down tasks you'd like some help with. When people offer to help, show them the list and invite them to choose something.

## Supporting Families Who are Grieving: Guidelines for Giving Help

One of the most important things you can do for families who are grieving is to show you care. Here are some things most families appreciate. Some may suit you better than others.

### Offer the kind of help that's a good fit for you.

**Offer to spend time with them.** Listen if they want to talk. Sit quietly if they just want company.

**Don't try to take away the grief.** Powerful and painful feelings will be with them for some time. Comments and efforts meant to cheer people up or find something positive in the situation are usually not helpful.

**Listen more, talk less.** It's fine to share your feelings and express your caring and concern. But it's important to keep the focus on the people who are grieving. Allow them to express their own feelings. Don't tell them how they ought to feel.

**Accept strong expressions of feeling.** This is an important part of grieving. Encouraging people to "be strong" or cover up their feelings isn't helpful.

**Offer to do chores.** There are many things that need to be done for the family. Offer something specific, such as cooking a meal, helping with homework, cleaning the kitchen, walking the dog, or driving the children to school or sports practice.

**Make contact.** Send a card that says you're thinking of them. Make a brief call. Drop off cookies or fresh vegetables from your garden.

**Accept "no thanks" gracefully.** If a family declines your help for the moment, accept their decision. Be available to support them when they are ready for your calls or visits.

**Hang in there.** Grieving takes a long time. Offer support over the coming weeks and months. Pay special attention to holidays, anniversaries and other special occasions.

## Taking Care of Yourself

**The grief processes described in this guide affect adults as well as children.** When a death occurs, adults often feel uncertain and insecure. They may act immature and self-centered under stress. They may be confused about how to move forward.

Sometimes parents are so overwhelmed by the loss of a family member they wonder if they have any energy left to take care of their children. In the face of this grief, it can be difficult to remain patient and understanding of your children's extra needs.

Parents sometimes want to send their children away to be cared for by others, until they feel they are coping better with the loss themselves. While this may be necessary on occasion, in most cases it is not what's best for the children. Remember that it's not a bad thing for your children to see you feeling distressed. Coping doesn't mean you have no pain. It means you feel the grief, and also find ways to move forward. When your children see you having strong emotions and dealing with these feelings, they learn skills they can use as well.

Getting support for your own grief process helps you stay available to your children as they move through this experience. It's important for your children to know that you have the support of other adults. This allows them to pay attention to their own experience, without feeling responsible for taking care of their parents.

Getting support for your own grief process helps you stay available to your children

## Resources you can turn to include:

- Your primary health care provider
- A community-based bereavement program or hospice service
- Counseling services
- A faith group
- Trustworthy friends and family members
- Web-based support services for people in bereavement

## Looking to the Future

**New grief can be overwhelming.** It may seem as if nothing will ever feel right again. A parent who is trying to help children deal with grief understandably feels challenged. This is why it's helpful to understand some of the facts about grief described in this guide. Grief does change over time. It's not always overwhelming. Life continues to matter. The sense of loss may not necessarily lessen, but it does become more bearable.

Taking the steps suggested in this guide can help you and your children through this process. Dealing with grief in a direct and honest way is a great gift you can offer your children and is one of the best ways to respect the memory of a loved one who has died.

# Resources for Support

New York Life Foundation

**www.AChildinGrief.com**

New York Life is committed to helping children who have experienced the death of a loved one. Our Web site, achildingrief.com, supports the parents, family, and teachers of bereaved kids and includes a comprehensive, state-by-state list of local support services for grieving children; book lists; articles; and materials to order, as well as links to other helpful organizations.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR
School Crisis & Bereavement

**www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis**

Information on how schools can support children who are dealing with loss and crisis.

National Alliance for
Grieving Children

**www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org**

The National Alliance for Grieving Children provides a network for nationwide communication among hundreds of children's bereavement centers who want to share ideas, information and resources with each other to better support the families they serve in their own communities.

**Acknowledgments**

We appreciate the contributions of Lynne Hughes, founder and former CEO, Comfort Zone Camp, and Robin Gurwitch, Ph.D., National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, in the development of this guide.

**Printed on recycled 100% post consumer waste, sustainably sourced paper.**

New York Life Foundation

www.NewYorkLifeFoundation.org