TEN TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO ARE GRIEVING

If you know a child who has experienced the death of someone, you might be wondering, "How can I help?" Here are a few basic principles to keep in mind.

Speak openly and honestly about the death.

After a death, one of the first questions a parent will ask is this: "How and when do I tell my children?" **There is no magical 'right time' to share the news of someone's death; the right time is the one you create. In general we recommend telling them as soon as possible**, so that they hear it from someone they trust rather than from other kids or social media.

Find a safe, comfortable place and start with a short, simple explanation about the death, in language children can understand. Let their questions guide what else to share. Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they can confuse children. You might say something like this: "Honey, I have very sad news. Daddy died. His heart stopped working. He had a heart attack and the doctors weren't able to fix his heart." Even though it can be hard to think about saying these words, being honest and open is a great first step in helping children who are grieving. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation and keeps children from having to use their limited energy and inner resources trying to figure out what happened. If the person died from an illness like cancer or leukemia, it's helpful to name it rather than saying, "He got really sick and died." Being general in this situation can create anxiety for children the next time someone gets sick with a cold or flu.

Listen.

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, and make judgments.

What's most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating. It can be tempting to try to minimize in order to "protect" children. Sometimes the best response is to repeat what you hear them say — called "reflecting" — so that they know they have been heard. For example, "You really miss your mom, especially when you wake up in the morning." Listening to children, without jumping in to try to fix anything or make it better, is one of the best ways to help them feel heard and supported. Once children trust that you will listen and understand, they'll be more likely to come to you when they're hurting or needing advice.

Be open to different ways of grieving.

What grief looks like varies greatly. Some children may cry quietly and want to be left alone. Others might have difficulty sitting still or being by themselves. Some children will not outwardly show reactions, which can be challenging for adults who are supporting them. There are many ways to process and express grief. People of all ages who are grieving tend to be hard on themselves, whether for crying, not crying, being strong, thinking about the person, or not thinking about the person. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each grief experience is unique. **You can help children (and yourself) by letting them know that all of their thoughts and feelings are okay.** Allowing them to grieve in their own way reinforces that there are many ways to respond, and that it's okay to find what

works best for them, as long as their behavior does not hurt others or themselves.

Offer choices.

Children appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. A death can leave them feeling powerless. Allowing them to make choices can help re-establish a sense of power, control, and trust. These choices can be simple and everyday such as, "Do you want to wear your red or purple T-shirt?" They can also be more complex, such as participating in the memorial service or sorting through the person's belongings. Whenever possible, invite children into the decision-making process. Providing informed choices helps them know they're valued and that they're an important part of the family.

Provide outlets for self-expression.

While some children will talk about their experiences, many will express themselves through art, writing, music, or creative play. Get out the crayons, paper, markers, paint, clay, and other art materials. You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of pictures, or writing a letter, but be open to their ideas and suggestions for projects. It's helpful to ask children if they want to share what they created with you, and to respect a "no" answer. Some children will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression, so be sure to create time and space for them to engage in big energy play like running outside, sports, or messy creative projects.

Talk about and remember the person who died.

Talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. It's okay to use their name and share what you remember about them. You might say, "Your mom really liked this song," or, "Your dad made the best pizza I've ever had." By bringing up the person's name, you give children permission to share their feelings and memories. Children often like to keep objects that belonged to the person or that have some significance related to them. With photos, consider making copies to give to young children so that they can carry them around without the fear of damaging the originals. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures a child might like, ask which ones are important to them. You may want to remember or mark significant days such as the birthday of the person who died, the anniversary of their death, and traditional holidays like Mother's Day, Father's Day, Thanksgiving and year-end. You can invite children to participate in activities to honor those significant days, such as visiting a grave site, lighting a candle, cooking a favorite meal, and sharing memories, among other possibilities.

Provide consistency and routine.

Life is often in upheaval after a death, so finding ways to create safety and predictability is helpful for children. For example, you might create routines around bedtime, after school activities, or meals. Children may also need some flexibility: This way they know what to expect (homework is done by 7 p.m.), but can also trust that if they need something else (tonight you can take a break and come back to it later), their world will be responsive.

Know that grief doesn't follow a schedule.

You may have heard that grief follows a linear course of stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The families at Dougy Center have taught us that grieving may include one, all, or none of these experiences and they do not occur in any particular order. Grief does not have a timeline, and it changes over the course of someone's life. Know that it's okay for children to continue to grieve the loss as they grow and develop.

Get extra help if needed.

While most children and teens will ultimately return to their prior level of functioning following a death, some are potentially at risk for developing challenges

such as depression, difficulties at school, or anxiety. While friends, family, or a support group may be enough for most children, others may require additional assistance. Some children are helped by working with a therapist. If you notice ongoing behaviors that interfere with a child's daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don't be afraid to ask about their experience and training in grief and loss, working with children, and their treatment philosophy and methods.

Find sources of support for yourself.

If you are parenting or supporting a child who is grieving, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Find good sources of support. Research shows us that how well a child does after a death is linked to how well the adults in their lives are doing. This doesn't mean hiding your grief from your child. Rather, it means ensuring that you have people and activities in your life that are sources of comfort and inspiration. By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them.

These are just a few tips for how to care for a child who is grieving (and yourself). Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

To download this tip sheet in Spanish, visit: Consejos Para Apoyar A Los Niños En Duelo.

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Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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