

Helping Children Cope with a Death in the Family

The death of a loved one: parent, grandparent, beloved aunt is an extraordinarily stressful event for children. With the love and support of those nearest to them, most can begin to heal and look back with fond memories, rather than tears.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 1.5 million children are living in a single-family household because of the death of one parent. One out of every 20 children age 15 and younger will suffer the loss of one or both parents. These statistics don't account for the number of children who lose a "parental figure," such as a grandparent or other relative that provide care.

By school age, children understand that death is an irreversible event. Yet even though youngsters recognize that death is something more than going to sleep for a long time, they still may have many unanswered questions that they may not verbalize: Where did grandmother go when she died? What is she feeling? Is she in pain? Why did she die? Can we ever see her again? Are you going to die too? Who will take care of me if you die? Offer opportunities for your child to ask these questions. The more clearly and honestly you answer them, the better he will fare through the grieving process.

Children react differently. The reactions of children to death are highly personal. One child might quietly and sadly express his grief. Another might become rambunctious and oppositional. Still another might become extremely anxious. Youngsters often take their cues from watching the reactions of other family members, particularly their parents. In some families, death is a taboo subject, and children sense that they should not talk about it; in others, death is discussed openly and children feel comfortable expressing their sadness.

Death of a parent. Whenever a child loses a parent, the event is traumatic and alters the course of her development. You cannot protect the child from what has happened, but you can help her face the reality of it. If you are a surviving parent, in addition to dealing with your own feelings of loss, you need to help your child through this experience. Expect reactions ranging from regression and anxiety to anger and depression. Be honest and open about what has taken place. Provide your child with a lot of comforting, both verbal and nonverbal. Reassure her that you are not going to leave her, too, and that life will get back into a routine as soon as possible.

If the primary caretaker (usually the mother) has died, and the father must return to work, he should find someone to assume a caretaking, nurturing role for a while - perhaps a relative or a nanny. Even so, while these substitutes can assist with day-to-day functions, the surviving parent will still need to spend more time with and give more attention to his child to help her adjust to their new life.

Death of a sibling. When a brother or a sister dies, children can find it just as difficult as losing a parent, sometimes even more so. In some ways a sibling is the person to whom a child is closest. They have been constant companions, sharing many life experiences. Perhaps they even shared a

bedroom. When a sibling dies, children may feel guilty, particularly since at some point nearly every youngster wishes that her sibling were dead. Or they may have survival guilt ("Why did he die and I didn't?"). They may even feel guilty because of the jealousy they experienced if their sibling was ill and got extra parental attention.

If one of your children dies, do not ignore the others during the grieving process. Even though you may be overwhelmed with your own sadness, your other children need a lot of attention, comforting and understanding. Mobilize other extended-family members and friends to help give your children support. Try to avoid putting the deceased child on a pedestal, or your other children may feel they can never be as perfect or as good in your eyes.

Death of a grandparent. When a grandparent dies, children may not find it as devastating as the loss of a parent or a sibling. To them, their grandparent is an older person, and when people get old, they often die. However, if the grandparent has provided day-to-day companionship for the child, perhaps even living with the family or residing nearby, the death will be much harder.

Also, with the passing away of a grandparent, children often think, "Now that my daddy's daddy is dead, does that mean that my daddy is going to die next?" If you sense this kind of reaction, reassure your child that you and your spouse are healthy and will probably live for a long time.

Do not shield your children. Some adults believe that children should be shielded from death. They keep children away from funerals. They try not to cry in front of their youngsters. They may make up stories in an attempt to protect children from pain ("Grandma had to go away for a long time; we won't see her for a while"). They may avoid all discussions of the deceased.

Despite the good intentions of these actions, they don't work and are counterproductive. As with most topics, communicating with children about death should be honest and direct. Children need to grieve as much as adults do. They need to be able to share their feelings and talk about how they are going to miss the person who has died. By school age they have already been exposed to death, even if only indirectly, by watching television or hearing about it from friends. Death should not be covered up and hidden.

To help your child, you need to feel comfortable with your own grief reaction over the death of a loved one. It is appropriate for your child to see you cry when you feel sad; he will take comfort knowing that you are expressing your feelings so openly. This will make it easier for him to do the same.

Seek Guidance. Always remember grieving following the loss of an important person in one's life is not an illness that can be cured. It is, however, a major stressful experience for children and their parents. Support, communication and the passing of time assist in the process. If you have concerns about how your child is managing the loss, contact your pediatrician or a professional mental health provider for advice.

For additional resources please see:

Child Grief Education Association <http://www.childgrief.org/>

Compassion Books Resources to help children and adults through serious illness, death, loss, grief and bereavement. www.compassionbooks.com or 800.970.4220.

FEMA for Kids Government kid friendly site to help children with trauma. www.fema.gov/kids

Grief Net Internet community for persons dealing with grief. <http://www.griefnet.org/>

Mental Health Issues Mental Health Association on Southeastern Pennsylvania, 800.688.4226, www.mhasp.org

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, 800.646.6460, www.nhpco.org

Hopewell Cancer Support, www.hopewellcancersupport.org