

OFFERING SUPPORT TO A CHILD AFTER A DEATH

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

It can be very difficult to know what to say or what to do to help a child who is grieving. Our own feelings of discomfort can get in the way of offering what the grieving child needs. The following suggestions may help you offer support and comfort.

- › Listen to them, but don't force them to share; let it come naturally.
- › Be available to talk. Talk about the loss as a family. Sharing can be very healing for everyone. Silence can make children feel isolated, and may convey the message that they should limit their grieving.
- › Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting. Don't try to make it okay; let them express fears, thoughts, and worries.
- › A child may want to talk about aspects of the death or memories repeatedly. It may be emotionally hard for you or you may tire of hearing the same story, but talking is a valuable part of managing grief.
- › Give honest information about the death based on the child's maturity level. Be truthful. Avoid saying someone "went to sleep" or "went away." Younger children may wonder when the person will wake up or be hurt that they left without saying goodbye.
- › It's fine to say that you don't have all the answers. Let your child know it's always okay to ask questions.
- › Like adults, children grieve at their own pace. Respect where they are in that process.
- › Allow children to participate in rituals if they wish.
- › Allow a child to express all the emotions he or she is feeling. Children need to know that their feelings are normal even though they might not be normal feelings at other times. If feelings such as anger or guilt last for many months, professional help might be needed to help them resolve those feelings.
- › Very young children may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings. They may show their emotions through other means such as play-acting, drawing, or acting out. Help them name what they are expressing.
- › Older children are drawn to peers in times of tragedy. They draw strength and support from each other. Allow some liberty to teens around how they make themselves feel better, i.e. playing music loudly, being on their phone more than usual. Allow them privacy (both physical and emotional space), but be available to them.
- › If bereaved children indicate in any way that they want help or counseling, get it for them immediately. Most children are hesitant to ask openly for formal counseling, so if this happens, consider it a blatant cry for help.
- › If the death brings up fears for you, turn to the adults in your life to help you cope. Don't lean on your child for emotional support.
- › You know your child's personality and behavior patterns. If you see changes that concern you, and they go on for more than a couple of weeks, contact a mental health professional.



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