

Supporting a child through grief

Even very young children feel the pain of bereavement, but they learn how to express his or her grief by watching the adults around them. After a loss—particularly of a sibling or parent—children need support, stability, and honesty. They may also need extra reassurance that they will be cared for and kept safe. As an adult, you can support children through the grieving process by demonstrating that it's okay to be sad and helping them make sense of the loss.

Answer any questions the child may have as truthfully as you can. Use very simple, honest, and concrete terms when explaining death to a child. Children—especially young children—may blame themselves for what happened and the truth helps them see they are not at fault.

Open communication will smooth the way for a child to express distressing feelings. Because children often express themselves through stories, games, and artwork, encourage this self-expression, and look for clues in those activities about how they are coping.

How to help a grieving child:

- Allow your child, however young, to attend the funeral if he or she wants to.
- Convey your spiritual values about life and death, or pray with your child.
- Meet regularly as a family to find out how everyone is coping.
- Help children find ways to symbolize and memorialize the deceased person.
- Keep your child's daily routine as normal as possible.
- Pay attention to the way a child plays; this can be one of a child's primary ways of communicating.

What not to do:

- Don't force a child to publicly mourn if he or she doesn't want to.
- Don't give false or confusing messages, like "Grandma is sleeping now."
- Don't tell a child to stop crying because others might get upset.
- Don't try to shield a child from the loss. Children pick up on much more than adults realize. Including them in the grieving process will help them adapt and heal.
- Don't stifle your tears; by crying in front of your child, you send the message that it's okay for him or her to express feelings, too.
- Don't turn your child into your personal confidante. Rely on another adult or a support group instead.