

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS

Losing a loved one is never easy. The time following a death is often filled with emotional turmoil, chaos, and change. For adults and children alike, grieving is an important part of accepting that a loved one has died, dealing with difficult feelings, and saying goodbye. **For children**, having a caring adult who will guide them through this process can create an opportunity for growth and transformation. **Here's how you can help your child cope with grief and begin the journey toward recovery after loss.**

Tell the Truth. Hiding information can cause kids to feel mistrust, and reluctant to turn to adults for support. Robin Goodman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, art therapist, and author of *The Day Our World Changed: Children's Art of 9/11*, explains: "When you don't tell the truth it makes feelings and information go underground, which is never good."

Use Simple Language. When discussing the death of a loved one, avoid making abstract ("He's passed on"; "He's in the great beyond") or literal ("We've lost her"; "She's no longer with us") statements that a child could misunderstand. Instead, use clear and concrete words to minimize confusion. Use direct, age-appropriate language. Reading an age-appropriate book on bereavement, such as *I Miss You*, by Pat Thomas or *The Saddest Time*, by Norma Simon, can also help children express their sad feelings.

Offer a Listening Ear. Children's concerns are often different than you might expect from worrying the deceased will get hungry underground to wondering who will throw the birthday parties. Encourage questions but don't worry about having all the answers; what's more important is being available and responding in ways that show you care.

Observe Behaviors. Children don't always communicate just with words. When there's a wound you can't see, it comes out in behavioral symptoms. So you have to be a detective and listen and watch. Watch for these red flags, which may call for increased outreach.

Accept Children's Feelings. It's natural for children to experience a wide range of emotions when processing the death of a loved one. By accepting children's concerns, we can demystify any misconceptions or feelings of responsibility they may have.

Express Your Own Emotions. Kids will express their feelings if they see you demonstrating yours. "Adults are the primary barometer that children have for their own mourning," Dr. Wolfelt explains. "You don't need to hide your reaction; that's not authentic and it doesn't validate that something difficult happened." Be sure to keep strong, dramatic feelings for private times with other adults and have your own coping skills and supports.

Allow for Ceremony or Ritual. Planting a tree, lighting a candle, attending a memorial, or collecting keepsakes are all ways a child can partake in saying good-bye to a loved one.

Maintain a Routine. Having regular recreational, social, and academic activities will help kids feel normal and grounded. It is common for children to be concerned with how their lives will change.

Monitor Media Coverage. If your loved one's death involved a tragedy that has gained public attention, shield children from repetitive media coverage/Internet/discussions. Though parents can't shield children from the inadvertent comments of strangers, family members, or peers, they can prepare children to handle these scenarios.