



CANCERcare®

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# HELPING CHILDREN WHO HAVE LOST A LOVED ONE

*The suggestions in this fact sheet are appropriate for children ages 2 to 12.*

**When a loved one dies, our world changes forever. This is true for both children and adults. If your child is old enough to love, they are old enough to feel grief. Children coping with the loss of a loved one often look to their parents, guardians or loved ones for comfort and guidance.**

## HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD DURING THIS DIFFICULT TIME

**Be aware that children grieve differently than adults.** Play is the language of childhood. A child may cry or seem sad one moment, then ask to play the next. Children can often work out difficult feelings during play. What appears to be regular play may be an important part of your child's grieving process. Playing with your child can comfort them and allow you to connect without speaking.

**Use language that your child can understand.** A child's understanding of death varies with their age. Saying that a loved one is "asleep," "lost" or "gone" may seem like a gentle concept to an adult, but it may alarm or confuse your child.

- Children ages 2 to 7 often see death as temporary. You may have to gently remind the child that the loved one has died and will not be coming back.
- Children ages 7 to 12 understand that death cannot be reversed. To cope with this knowledge, they may ask questions about the details of the loved one's death. Be as honest and developmentally appropriate as you can with the child.



### **Allow your child to attend the funeral if they want to attend with you.**

Funerals are difficult for everyone. You may be tempted to shield your child from this experience. However, children usually respond best when given the choice to attend or stay home. Explain what happens at a funeral service to help them understand what to expect for your culture or religion. If your child is younger than 12 and wishes to attend the funeral, bring some toys for them to play with. Arrange to have a friend or neighbor take the child home when they want to leave.

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**Share your faith and beliefs in ways your child can understand.** The idea of a loved one going to heaven, another realm or being reincarnated may bring comfort to those whose beliefs include an afterlife. Keep in mind, though, that a child who does not understand that death is permanent may believe that they can visit the loved one in heaven or in that person's believed afterlife. You would want to make it clear that this is not possible.

**Hug your child more often.** A grieving child may need more physical comforting than usual.

**Ease your child's fears.** When a loved one dies, a young child may worry that other people they love will also die. Your child may also worry that they caused the loved one's death in some way. Pay close attention to your child so that you can help ease their fears.

**Include your children in plans to cope with special days.** Thinking about birthdays, anniversaries and holidays is sometimes more difficult than dealing with the days themselves. Talk to your child when you make plans for honoring your loved one. Give yourself permission to try something new.

**Ask for help.** Members of your extended family, friends and neighbors can do things like shop for groceries, walk the dog or run other errands to give you more time to spend with your child.

### **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercares.org](http://www.cancercares.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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### **GET EXTRA SUPPORT**

**Take care of yourself.** Parents and loved ones helping children through grief are usually grieving as well. Grief can leave you feeling tired and weak. Make sure you eat and rest regularly. Find sources of support to help you cope with the challenges of grief. Forms of support can be talking to friends, family and loved ones or using existing or new coping skills.

**Consider counseling.** Counseling can be a place to process your feelings and openly talk about the loved one who died. Consider consulting a professional who understands the special needs of the bereaved for you and your child.

If you need help coping, talk with your health care team or an oncology social worker. Professional oncology social workers at CancerCare offer free counseling and support groups for anyone affected by cancer. To speak with an oncology social worker at CancerCare, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).

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