

When a loved one dies, the world changes forever. Children coping with the loss of a loved one often look to their parents or guardians for comfort and guidance. This fact sheet covers:

- How to discuss loss with your child
- Ways to help your child grieve
- How to help yourself in times of grief



How to Tell Your Child About Loss

Use language that your child can understand. A child's understanding changes with their age. Saying that a loved one is "asleep," "lost" or "gone" 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 will not be coming back.
- Children ages 7 to 12 usually understand that death cannot be reversed. To cope with this knowledge, they may ask questions about the details of the loved one's death.

Ease your child's fears. When a loved one dies, a young child may worry that other people will also die or that they somehow caused the loved one's death. Pay close attention to help ease these fears.

Share your beliefs in ways your child can understand. The idea of heaven can bring comfort to those who believe in an afterlife. However, a child who does not understand the permanence of death may believe that the loved one can be visited in heaven. Try to gently make clear that this is not possible.



Suggestions on How to Help Your Child

Be aware that children grieve differently than adults do. A child may cry or seem sad one moment, then want to play the next. 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.

Allow your child to attend the funeral if they want to. You may want to protect your child from the sadness of a funeral. However, children usually like the choice to attend or stay home. If you have a young child, bring some toys and have a friend or neighbor take the child home if they want to leave.

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

Include your children in plans to cope with special days. Upcoming birthdays, anniversaries and holidays can often be difficult. Talk to your child when you make plans for honoring their loved one. See what might be best for them emotionally.



Remember to Support Yourself

Ask for help. Members of your extended family, friends and neighbors can do things like shop for groceries or help with household chores to give you more time to spend with your child.

Take care of yourself. Parents helping their children through grief are usually grieving as well. This can make you feel tired and weak. Make sure you eat and rest regularly. Try to find moments for your own grief and healing.

Consider counseling. Counseling can be a place to process your feelings and 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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