

# helping children THROUGH LOSS

*It can be difficult to know how to talk to children about death, especially when you are working through your own grief. Children may respond to loss very differently than adults. Their understanding largely depends on age, previous experiences with death and the response to death they have learned from others. You can help children cope with loss by openly expressing your sadness and answering their questions in an honest and age-appropriate way. Speaking openly and truthfully about your child's death will further establish trust between you and your other children.*

*There may be times in the beginning when your grief is so great that you cannot help your children. Healing yourself is important to helping your children, so allowing others to also support your children will help both of you. A close friend or family member, faith leader, school or grief counselor can assist you in helping your children cope with their sibling's death and the changes in the family.*

## HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR ADULTS WHO ARE HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DEATH

### BE HONEST.

It's natural to want to protect children from the pain and sadness associated with death, but children sense when adults are sad and acting differently. They may feel insecure or mistrustful if information is hidden from them. They may feel as though they have lost a relationship not only with their sibling but also with the adult.

### USE SIMPLE, CONCRETE TERMS TO EXPLAIN DEATH.

Expressions such as "we lost him," "she is resting now," or "he passed" can be confusing or frightening to children. Explain death by relating it to something the child is familiar with, such as the death of an animal or plant. Children may react very differently to death. Some may become aggressive, others talkative and questioning, while still others may be quiet and withdrawn.

### ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO TALK IF THEY WANT TO.

It is normal for children to ask questions. Even if you feel that you do not have the answers, don't worry. Open communication gives you the opportunity to correct misinformation or misconceptions children might have.

### MAINTAIN A FAMILY SCHEDULE AND ROUTINE AS CLOSE TO NORMAL AS POSSIBLE.

This will help children to feel more secure and in control.

### SAY YOUR CHILD'S NAME.

Encourage children to talk about their sibling. Share happy memories with them. If the child is a sibling, reassure them that they are still a brother or sister and always will be.

### DON'T HIDE YOUR TEARS.

Showing your sadness and talking openly about your feelings sets an example for your children and helps them to learn healthy coping behaviors.

### MAKE SURE CHILDREN DON'T FEEL AT FAULT OR GUILTY.

Some young children believe that their thoughts, feelings, or words have power over others and they may blame themselves for what happened. Older children and teenagers may have felt typical sibling jealousy or anger. They need help understanding that their sibling's death had nothing to do with anything they thought, said, or did. Angry thoughts do not cause people to die.

# helping children THROUGH LOSS CONTINUED

## DISCUSS YOUR FAMILY'S SPIRITUAL BELIEFS.

Explain things to children in age-appropriate terms. Including children in family customs and traditions can be a source of comfort for both you and the child.

## HELP CHILDREN EXPRESS GRIEF.

Keeping grief inside can sometimes be harmful. Help children express their thoughts through art, play or memory-making activities. Here are a few ideas to help children express their grief in a tangible way:

- Paint or draw a picture for their sibling
- Write a letter
- Light a candle
- Plant a tree
- Tell stories
- Create something in memory of the sibling

## SHOW AFFECTION.

Give children extra hugs and cuddles. Assure them that you are there to help.

## READ BOOKS ON DEATH AND LOSS WITH CHILDREN.

There are several age-appropriate books related to death and grief. Please refer to the grief resource page of this booklet or call or e-mail the Grief and Bereavement Specialist if you need specific recommendations.

## MONITOR CHILDREN'S GRIEF.

Talk with a pediatrician or a mental health specialist about any concerns you might have. Responses to grief may come and go throughout childhood or adolescence. Birthdays, family celebrations, or the anniversary of the child's death can be powerful reminders and rekindle grief.

## BE PATIENT.

Remember, children mourn differently than adults. Their grief may not always be obvious or immediate. Grief can be a long journey for everyone.

---

## SOME SIGNS THAT CHILDREN MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH GRIEF AND MAY BENEFIT FROM PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT INCLUDE:

- Excessive crying
- Regressive behavior (e.g. bed-wetting)
- Persistent anger/temper tantrums
- Lack of interest in daily activities
- Sharp decline in grades
- Fear of being alone
- Withdrawal from friends
- Severe separation anxiety
- Delinquency or promiscuity
- Persistent sleep problems

## THE FOLLOWING TWO SIGNS REQUIRE IMMEDIATE PROFESSIONAL HELP:

- Disabling depression
- Suicidal thoughts