

General Ways to Help Children and Teens Cope with Death

from Bridges Center for Grieving Children

Helping Children and Teens Cope with Death booklet

Be Honest – Provide accurate information to children to help them begin to process the loss and build trust. If they are not given simple, honest information on how the death occurred, children will use their imagination to fill in the information they lack. Without the help of a trusted adult in understanding the death can cause children to misunderstand and to feel a greater level of fear.

Use simple, straight forward, and easy-to-understand language based on your child's age.

Listen to the thoughts and questions the children ask you and answer those as best you can. Children will let you know when they are done taking in new information. It is okay to say “I don't know” if there are questions you are not sure how to answer.

You Are the Best Model– Allow children to see you grieve. If they see you cry, they may be more comfortable crying or showing their own emotions. You can explain, “Mommy is really sad today because she misses your brother. Sometimes when I am sad, I cry. When I feel sad, I like a hug and to listen to music. Looking at pictures helps me feel better too.” This may help open the door for you to sit and talk about how the child is feeling and what helps them feel comforted.

Help them label and express their emotions when they are able to come to you for support. It is okay for your children and teens to see that your grief is messy at times. As the adult it is important to seek your own support from other adults you trust.

Include the Children – Many changes occur following the death of a family member. Talk about these changes, especially those that directly affect the children. Some children may worry about seemingly small things, such as “Who will drive me to school?” or “Who will cook dinner now that dad has died?” Encourage children to ask any questions they have to you or other trusted people.

Maintaining routines and expectations is helpful for children. Getting back to these after a death occurs can be difficult. Try to set a tentative timeline with the children for when they will return to school and activities. For children in school, include their teacher or counselor in what has happened and your tentative plan for return.

Be with Your Children – Find a few minutes each day to be present with each of your children or teens. By providing time to connect, you communicate that they are still important and

cared for. You also open lines of communication so they can talk about the person who died, ask questions, express their feelings, or just share their day with you.

It may be beneficial to have an adult outside of the immediate family spend individual time with each child or be responsible for checking in with them. This could be a trusted aunt or uncle, spiritual leader, or family friend.

Expect Many Different Reactions – Remember just as you are feeling a wide range of emotions, children are experiencing the same thing – it may just look different. Children typically grieve in bursts, showing sadness one minute and happiness the next.

Younger children may not have the language skills to describe the emotions they feel.

Older children may attempt to hide their feelings from you in efforts to protect you, or because they are uncomfortable with how they feel or are not sure how to appropriately express their emotions.

Give children of all ages opportunities to express their feelings and cope in safe, healthy ways. For examples of this, please see the *Expressive Activities* section in this booklet.

Remember the Person Who Died – Keeping the relationship and memories flowing will help children process what has happened. They may want to keep something like a piece of clothing, create a place to go in your home to honor their memory or a special toy to help remember the person who died.

There is No Time Limit on Grief - It is a life-long process. Children will often re-grieve the loss as they grow and change. Special events such as birthdays, holidays, school and sporting events, may trigger feelings of grief. This process of re-grieving as children and teens grow is normal and to be expected.

Plan for Significant Times – Have a plan in place for special holidays and events. Allow all family members a choice and some control of how and when to celebrate these times. Some in the family may not want to celebrate the significant days, while others may want nothing to change. It is okay to seek a balance.