

# LifeSkills

## How to help children with the death of a loved one

*One of the hardest tasks an adult can face is helping a child deal with the death of a family member or friend. The task can be made all the more difficult by the fact that you too are grieving.*

*Though you cannot change the facts of death, you can provide valuable support to a child by helping him or her cope with the loss of a loved one.*

*The following guidelines are designed to help you and the child better deal with this difficult time.*

### Deal with the facts realistically

It is important that you do not down-play the fact of the death or, on the other hand, overly dramatize the situation.

*Deal with the issues surrounding the event truthfully. Be as factual as possible.*

Children have vivid imaginations and their imaginings are likely to be more frightening to them than the facts.

The words you use may be dictated by the age of the child. The honesty, love, and compassion that you will convey will be an important source of comfort and security to the child.

### Reassure the child

Some children may feel they are in some way responsible for the death of the loved one. Or, if the death is the result of some special illness or disease, they may feel their life is threatened.

Children need reassurance. For example, make sure they understand that the doctors worked hard to save the life of the loved one, and that they themselves are safe and secure.

### Acknowledge the child's reactions

Support the child's emotional reactions. Tell them it's OK to feel sad, that you feel sad too.

*Encourage them to verbalize their grief.*

Ask them why they feel sad, what is it they will remember about the loved one. You can contribute to this process by telling the child what your feelings are. If you feel comfortable,

you may reveal what you do when you feel sad and what makes you feel better when you are sad.

### Explain the process

Let your child know that grief is normal when we lose someone who was important to us. Even though it will be hard for them to believe, reassure them that their grief and sadness will pass with time.

### Involve the child

Most people — adults and children — feel a sense of helplessness in the face of the death of a loved one. It helps if we can feel involved.

*You may want to give the child choices about what they could do to say good-bye. For example, the child could make a drawing, lay a flower at the grave, or write something for the deceased.*

Letting the child attend the funeral or memorial service may also be good, provided that the child is old enough to understand what is occurring. The communal nature and the ritual of the service may help the child feel his or her grief is a shared grief and that they are not alone.

### Provide stability and security

Especially during the period immediately following the death, it is important to maintain a sense of stability and security for the child. Keep to your normal schedule as much as possible in respect to such things as meal times, school, and play activities. It is also important to let the child know what is going on, for example, in terms of plans for the funeral or the arrival of family from out of town.

### Professional help

If you are having a hard time dealing with your child's and/or your own grief, or you observe unusual changes in your child's behavior, consider looking for professional help.

Watch for warning signs. For example, if she no longer wants to play with friends or take part in other favorite activities she used to like. Other symptoms could be eating or sleep problems, persistent nightmares, or physical complaints such as stomach pains or headaches that have no obvious physical cause.

### Books can help

Some parents find books useful in helping their child through the grieving process. Bookstores and public libraries have age-appropriate books for your child, such as fictional stories of children experiencing the death of a loved one. There are also books that provide information and recommend strategies helpful to parents.

One of the books many parents have found helpful is *Are you sad too? : helping children deal with loss and death*, by Dinah Seibert, Judy C. Drolet, and Joyce V. Fetro. (1993) Santa Cruz: ETR Associates.

La version française de ce document sera disponible sur Internet sous peu. Vous pouvez vous la procurer en composant le 1-800-668-4125.

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