

Helping Children Who Have Lost a Loved One

Suggestions appropriate for children ages 2 to 12

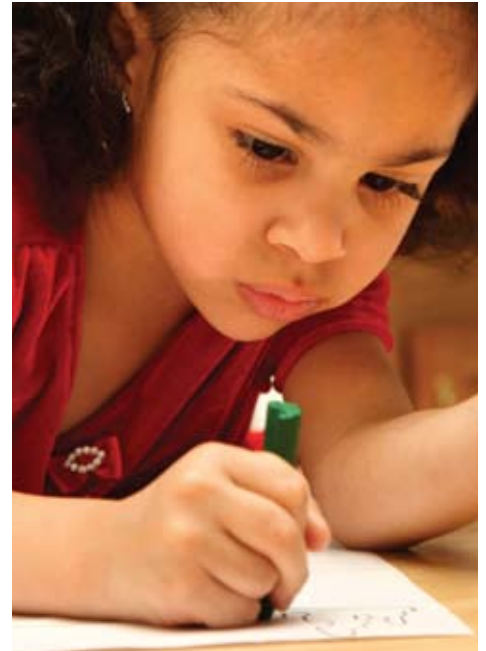
When a loved one dies, our world changes forever. This is true for both children and adults. If your child is old enough to love, he or she is old enough to feel grief. Children coping with the loss of a loved one often look to their parents for comfort and guidance.

Here are some suggestions on how to help your child during this difficult time.

Be aware that children grieve differently than adults do. Play is the language of childhood. A child may cry or seem sad one moment, then ask to go out 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 him or her and allow the two of you to connect without speaking.

Use language that your child can understand. Children'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 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.



Allow your child to attend the funeral if she or he wants to. 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. If your child is younger than 12 and wishes to attend the funeral, bring some toys for him or her to play with. Arrange to have a friend or neighbor take the child home when he or she wants to leave.

Share your faith and beliefs in ways your child can understand. The idea of a loved one going to heaven can 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 he or she can visit the loved one in heaven. You would want to make it clear that this is not possible.

Hug your child 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 he or she loves will also die. Or, your child may worry that he or she caused the loved one's death in some way. Pay close attention to your child so that you can help ease his or her fears.

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

Take care of yourself. Parents helping their children through grief are usually grieving as well. Grief can leave you feeling tired and weak. Make sure you eat and rest regularly. It is important to help your child without forgetting about your own needs.

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

Get extra support. Consider consulting a professional who understands the special needs of bereaved children. You may learn new ways to help your child. For example, there are support groups available for children who have lost a loved one to cancer. There are also support groups for parents that may give you a chance to discuss your concerns. Contact CancerCare to learn about our free individual and group counseling services for children and adults.

CancerCare Can Help

CancerCare's professional oncology social workers are available to help you cope with the loss of a loved one to cancer. We provide free individual counseling and support groups over the telephone, online and in person. CancerCare also offers practical help and referrals to other resources. For more information, call **1-800-813-HOPE (4673)** or visit www.cancercares.org.



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