

Helping Children Who Have Lost a Loved One

Suggestions appropriate for children ages 2 to 12

When children experience the death of someone they love, their world changes forever. Remember that if your child is old enough to love, he or she is old enough to feel grief. Also keep in mind that children's understanding of death varies according on their age.

Children coping with the loss of a loved one often look to their parents for comfort and guidance. At the same time, the parents themselves may be trying to adjust to life without the person and can be feeling a wide range of emotions. Helping your child without forgetting about your own needs is an important part of the grief process.

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

Take care of yourself. Grief can leave you feeling tired and vulnerable, so it is important to eat and rest regularly.

Ask for help. Extended family, friends, and neighbors can help you with household chores so that you can conserve your energy. They can do things like shop for groceries, sort the mail, and take messages off your answering machine to give you more time to spend with your child.

Recognize that children grieve differently than adults. Play is the language of childhood. Children use it to learn how to express their feelings. A child may cry and seem sad one moment, then ask to go out to play the next. Children are often able to work out difficult feelings during play. Remember that what appears to be regular play may in fact be an important part of your child's grieving process. Participating in your child's play can comfort your child. It can also provide you with non-verbal ways to communicate with him or her.



Use accurate, age-appropriate language. Read information on how children's understanding of death varies according to their age. The idea of a loved one being "asleep," "lost" or "gone" may seem like a gentle concept to you as an adult, but it can alarm and confuse your child.

Children ages 2 to 7 see death as a temporary condition. This means that you may have to remind them that their loved one has died and will not be coming back. Children ages 7 to 12 understand that death cannot be reversed. They might be curious and ask questions about the details of their loved one's death as a way to cope with this knowledge.

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 the permanence of death may believe that they can visit their loved one in heaven, so it's important to be clear.

Children of all ages seek comfort in tangible, concrete ways. A special photograph of children with their loved one can help them preserve an image of the person in their mind.

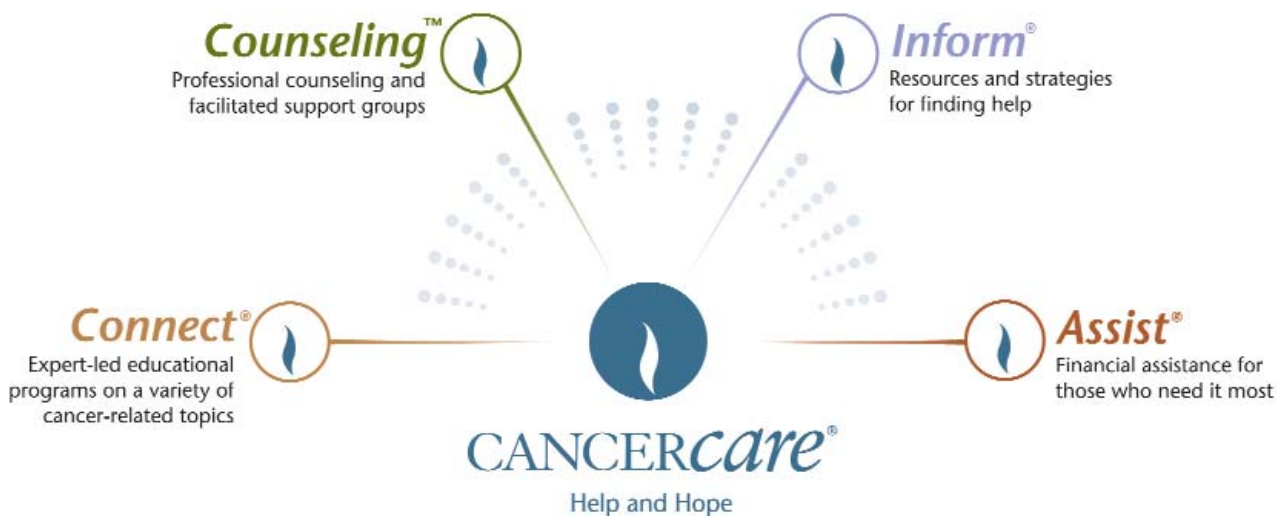
Let your child attend the funeral if she or he wants to. Funerals are very difficult for everyone, and you may be tempted to shield your child from this experience. However, children will be curious about the funeral, and they usually respond best when given the choice to attend or stay home. For children younger than 12, it's a good idea to bring some toys for them to play with and have a friend or neighbor ready to take them home when they want to leave. Do not force children to attend the funeral if they wish to stay home.

Provide extra reassurance at this time. Your child will need more hugs and physical comforting than usual. Young children might experience fears of abandonment. Others may get scared that other people they love might die and worry about who will take care of them. At times, your child may even worry that he or she may have caused the death in some way. Sometimes children receive comfort from having a small item that belonged to their loved one.

Include your children in plans to cope with special days. Thinking about birthdays, anniversaries and holidays is often more difficult than the days themselves. Talk to your children and make plans for how you would like to honor your loved one. Don't be afraid to try something new and different.

Seek support. Speaking with a professional who understands the special needs of children who are grieving can help you discover additional ways to help your child. A support group for children who have lost a loved one might help your child feel less alone. Support groups for parents can provide you with opportunities to share your concerns as well. CancerCare offers free counseling services provided by professionally trained oncology social workers for both children and adults.

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