How to help children after losing a parent.

Losing a parent feels insurmountable at any age. Our series helps you face it — from the practical logistics to the existential questions about death and dying today.

No matter how old you are, the death of a family member can bring up a range of difficult and often overwhelming emotions: shock, deep sadness, confusion, anxiousness and anger, just to name a few.

For bereaved children dealing with the loss of an important figure like a parent, these intense feelings can be particularly hard to process. Kids need their surviving parent, caregivers or the other trusted adults in their lives to help them navigate the murky waters of grief.

We asked grief therapists and counselors to share what a parent can do to lovingly support a young child after the other parent has died.

How to Talk About The Death With Your Child

Death is a challenging subject to discuss with anyone, let alone a child. But sugarcoating it or avoiding the topic as a way to protect your kid can do more harm than good, experts say. Here's how to handle it:

Language matters, so be aware of the words you choose.

Avoid the urge, however well-intentioned, to use euphemisms to explain the death. You may think telling your kid, "We lost Mommy" or "Daddy is sleeping" will soften the blow, but this approach can be confusing to children, who tend to take things literally.

"I can recall a teen recounting to me how her family handled a significant death years before. There was a period in time that she was scared to go to sleep when she was young, because a part of her feared that what if she, too, never woke up," said Kate Zera Kray, a social worker and psychotherapist who specializes in grief.

Instead, stick to simple and direct language. Don't be afraid to use words like "died" and "killed," even if they seem harsh.

With younger kids, you can also say something like, "Daddy's heart stopped beating," and emphasize how we need our hearts to work in order to stay alive, said Judy Schiffman, a licensed clinical social worker and director of the Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center.

Be honest about the nature of the death while taking your child's age into account.

You want to be as straightforward as possible about how their parent died, but only to a degree that's appropriate for your child's age and developmental stage. Going into too much detail can overwhelm a younger mind, so keep your explanations truthful but brief.

"Hiding the truth can cause mistrust later as children learn more about the death," said Ellen Roese, a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in grief.

Note that younger kids — like those in the 3-to 5-year-old range — may have trouble grasping the permanence of death. "They will say Daddy is gone and an hour later wait at the window for Daddy to come home," Schiffman said.

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- JUDY SCHIFFMAN, DIRECTOR OF THE BARR-HARRIS CHILDREN'S GRIEF CENTER

Kids around this age also have what's called "magical thinking" — so they may believe they're somehow responsible for their parent's death because of something they said, thought or did, or that the parent can be brought back to life.

"Reassure them that they did not cause the death and it is not some form of punishment," Roese said.

Encourage your child to ask questions about the death.

Letting your kid know it's OK if they have questions about what happened to their parent will help ensure that death doesn't become a taboo subject in your house. And what your child asks may give you insight into how they're dealing with things.

"Adults assume they know what their kids are thinking or afraid about and it's often quite surprising," Roese said. "Just listen, listen, listen."

What You Need to Know to Help Your Child Grieve

Guiding your child through their grief while you're grieving yourself can be difficult, to say the least. The therapist-backed advice below will better prepare you to handle the challenges that come your way.

Allow your kids to attend the funeral — if they want to.

You should never force your child to go to the wake, funeral or burial of a parent. That said, if they want to go, let them, said Schiffman. Giving your child the option to have that closure, if they want it, can be valuable in their healing. But make sure you prepare them beforehand for what they might see or hear if they decide to attend, like an open-casket viewing, for example.

If they want to be there, arrange for a person they're comfortable with to accompany them to the service, as you will likely be too distracted to give them the attention they need, Schiffman said. And if the child says they want to leave or take a break at any point, allow them to do so.

Afterwards, expect that your child may ask you questions like, "Why is ommy in the ground if she has gone to heaven?"

"Religion can dictate a response," Schiffman said. "Or one way to answer is to say, 'Mommy's soul, her love of you, has gone to heaven but her body remains in the ground.'"

Know that children grieve differently than adults.

So try not to jump to conclusions about what your kid is — or isn't — feeling. For example, grieving in bursts is totally normal for kids, even though it may seem odd to the parent.

"[Children] have a limited tolerance for pain," Roese said. "They will take breaks in their grief and laugh and play. Adults do not usually do this and thus they assume their children are not grieving when they are."

What's more, grief is a very individual process, so even kids in the same family may be affected by the death in different ways, Kray said.

"When I have worked with multiple family members who are grieving the same person, I see the relationship and nuances and how vastly one sibling's coping and processing can differ from the next," she said. "Different approaches may not be understood, but ideally, they would be respected and welcomed."

Ask them open-ended questions about how they're doing and really listen to their answers.

For example, "How was it going back to school after the funeral?"; or, "How did it feel when your friend made that comment about you 'not having a mom anymore?'" Kray suggested.

And if your child says they don't feel like talking about Mom or Dad at the moment, try to be understanding of that.

"Respect [their] boundaries," Kray said. "Extra credit for not taking them personally."

It's OK for your kid to see you sad sometimes.

Don't feel pressured to disguise your feelings and "be strong" for your children all the time. You're also going through an intensely stressful and emotional period so it's only natural that you'd be upset.

*"*Do not hide your own tears," Roese said. "Crying is a healthy release and this modeling allows kids to know it is OK to cry."

Try to keep your kid's routine as consistent as possible.

"Structure gives children security during a scary time," Roese said.

That also means keeping household rules and discipline the same.

"The predictability of consequences will help the child feel secure," Roese added.

And before your child goes back to school, be sure to let their teacher, counselor and the administrators know what happened. They can check in with the student, offer support and make note of any concerning changes in their behavior.

Your son or daughter may be more clingy after the death.

It's common for a child who's lost a parent to develop an intense fear of losing the other one. This may translate into a preoccupation with the living parent's health and safety.

"They will often want to sleep in the bed or on the floor near the surviving parent," Roese said. "Reassure them that your health is good and that you are there to take care of them."

Don't forget to take care of yourself.

You may be so focused on making sure your kids are OK that you neglect to tend to your own grief. Practicing some form of self-care — whether that's journaling, getting some exercise, going to therapy or joining a grief support group — can help you cope with the loss, while also putting you in a better position to be able to help your kids.

"Please give yourself some credit for navigating a challenging and emotional situation, to put it mildly and over simplistically," Kray said. "Because you are also grieving, I hope you can lead by example and find your own space to process the feelings that arise for you around the loss."

Signs They Should See A Therapist

You may want to get your child professional counseling right away, but sometimes it's better to let your kid grieve on their own before they talk to a therapist, Schiffman said.

"We often tell parents to wait for a while to see how the child is doing," she said. "This can be anywhere from a couple weeks to six months."

Given the magnitude of the loss, anticipate some changes to your child's mood or behavior.

"Expect that children will regress in their behavior, have trouble focusing at school and fall apart over very small things," Roese said. "Be patient with them."

However, sometimes when these changes are intense or extreme, the child may be in need of professional help. Here are some of the signs to look out for, according to grief counselor Linda Goldman, author of "Life and Loss: A Guide To Helping Grieving Children."

The child repeatedly refuses to talk about the death and how they're feeling.

The child is having considerable problems at school, like behavioral issues, getting in trouble or failing classes.

The child shows drastic changes to their sleeping or eating — i.e., doing it in excess or not at all.

The child socially withdraws to the point that they've stopped playing with friends or wants to quit sports and other extracurricular activities.

The child threatens to harm him- or herself or is abusive toward animals or other kids.

Ways To Keep The Parent's Memory Alive

Finding ways to commemorate the parent who died can be healing for both you and your kids. In the short term, this may include allowing your child to participate in the funeral or memorial service in some way (e.g. writing a letter to put in the casket, helping choose the family photos that will be on display, drawing a picture for the parent). Later on, it might mean planting a tree in the parent's honor, visiting one of their favorite places, celebrating the parent's birthday, framing photos to hang in their bedroom or around the house and just regularly talking and sharing memories about the person.

Consider helping your child put together a memory box that contains letters, cards, photos and other keepsakes that remind them of their parent. They can also create a memory book — "a collection of drawn or written feelings and thoughts that allow the child to re-experience memories in a safe way," Goldman said.

"The books serve as useful tools to enable children to tell about the person who died, and open discussion," she wrote in Healing Magazine. "Kids can share funny, happy or sad memories."

But ultimately, it's up to each family to determine what works best for them.

"Because there is no right nor single approach, I hope dialogue, brainstorming and sharing can happen within the family," Kray said.