

## Helping Kids Deal with Grief: Death of a Parent or Loved One

1. **Words:** Kids may need help in finding the words to explain what happened to their parent or loved one. They are very concrete thinkers so using clear descriptors will be helpful (My mom died of cancer; My dad was killed in a car crash.) Although it sounds soothing to use other terms like 'she passed away' or 'we lost him' it's not very helpful for kids who might think we can find those who are just lost...maybe they will return. Help kids find the words to respond to 'what's your dad do?' 'where's your mom?' 'how many kids in your family?' since these will now need to be answered differently. Use simple, clear words as you talk with them and others.
1. **Questions:** Kids will have lots of questions and some of them will make us a little uncomfortable, but we should do our best to explain honestly and at an age appropriate level. They might want to know the actual cause of death, how it happened. Kids ask about the way the body was dealt with and prepared for burial. They might ask about what happens next, to the spirit and the body. Some have questions about heaven and hell, judgment and eternal life. They might ask 'why?' and question God's purpose or plan. We ought to communicate that all these questions are ok, good and normal. We might not have the answer, so we don't make something up, but we can decide to discover answers together or some may just need to wait till we see God and ask Him.
1. **Changes:** Kids are interested and even concerned about the changes that will happen now that the loved one has died. They might want to know about daily routines, planned vacations, holidays, who's in charge, decision making, living arrangements or even plans to replace income. All these things affect their lives and they will have concerns about the changes. Be honest with them about what you know and about the things you don't know yet. Be careful about making big promises that you might not be able to keep. (Consider using 'In Trouble? 4 Questions' diagram)
1. **Feelings:** Kids are going to experience a lot of different emotions and we need to be prepared for that. We can let them know about our own emotions and feelings during this same process of grieving. Let them know that all of these feelings are normal and good, and we can focus them on healthy ways to express them. We want to avoid destructive words and actions, or acting out, based on our emotions. We should be ready for a wide variety of emotions at different times. Kids may benefit from some alternative ways of explaining their emotions by role play, drawings, music or movement. Expressing these emotions to a trusted adult, in a safe environment can be an important part of the process. (Consider using 'What About My Feelings' diagram)
1. **The Bible:** Using God's Word will be one of your best tools in helping a child who is grieving. The Bible gives clear answers about what happens when a person dies. Use verses that show God's care and compassion, His understanding of those who are hurting. Share verses that give hope for the future and talk about eternal life. Read

stories of others in the Bible who have experienced the death of loved ones (Job, Ruth and Naomi, David, Lazarus' family, the mom whose son died, and even the disciples who grieved over Jesus' death). God's Word will give them something to hold on to when life is changing around them.

1. **Memories:** It's a good and healthy thing for children to remember the loved one who died. Sharing those memories, and even recording them, will be part of the healing process. They might want to just talk about favorite stories or events, and repeat them often. Some will be helped by making a 'memorial' of some kind- a scrap book, a collage, a video or even a special shelf of collected items that remind them of their parent. Allow them choices whenever possible and let them decide how they want to keep those memories alive.
1. **Community:** Kids will need to know that there are others going through the same emotions and grieving process that they are experiencing. Bringing those loved ones together to talk, share, laugh and even cry together, will help the child know that he is not alone. Create a safe environment to open up, share encouragement to one another, and even learn to minister to someone else. Adults will sometimes experience healing as they see and hear the simple honesty of a child's reactions to grief.
1. **Prayer:** Teaching children to go to God in prayer, sharing everything that's on their heart, at anytime and anywhere, will be one of the most effective ways of healing. Looking at some of David's prayers will demonstrate that we can be very honest with God about how we are feeling, what we're afraid of and expressing our concerns. These prayers from Psalms always show David expressing the problems and his feelings about them, but turn our attention back to our ultimate trust in God and His desire for our good and His glory in every circumstance.
1. **Rest:** Kids are probably the best at learning to take a break from grief. They can be crying one minute and then headed out to play the next. It's important to have times of fun and relaxation, enjoying life and family together, as a healthy break from the grieving process. As time goes on, the breaks will become longer and the emotional times will be less and less frequent. We can learn a lesson of trust as we watch children, learning to leave the problems in God's hands and move on with what He calls us to do in life.
1. **Reminders:** This one is listed last in the process we are discussing, because it often catches us off guard. Kids will be doing just fine and then something will remind them of the loved one that died. A baseball game will remind them of the one they attended with Dad, a commercial on TV that shows a mom and daughter playing together... it can be almost anything, a birthday, an item of clothing, an event, a photo, a smell, a particular meal... and suddenly the child is reminded of their loss... and then there is an emotional response. Be prepared for these and for the reaction that comes with it. Be

compassionate and begin to use some of the tools you've already learned... probably beginning with the first one- learning to use words to express what's happening.

**Hands on the Clock:** All these items are around a clock to remind us that this process takes time and we may go through these phases many times. Also, there are 3 hands on the clock. Each hand goes around the circle at different speeds. Kids and adults are the same. Some will go through these areas very quickly, like the second hand. Others, like the minute hand, will go at a more expected speed. But some, like the hour hand, will take much longer to process through each area. We need to show grace and compassion. We are all different... that's the way God made us!