Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Helping Your Child After the Death of a Parent

This information explains how to help your child after the death of a parent.

Understanding your child's grief

For all children, the death of a parent is devastating. No matter how old your child is, you may feel you need to protect them from the sadness and confusion you're feeling. Like adults, children may need help understanding and adjusting to life after loss. Remember that how your child grieves will depend on their age, understanding of death, and how those around them are grieving.

Grieving children

Children express grief differently than adults. They may have short and intense bursts of emotion following the death of their parent. They may also have physical reactions, like pain and aches in their body or changes in their sleep schedule. Some children may express their grief through changes in their behavior. They may struggle with routine tasks or behave in ways they never have before.

They may grieve in short periods with breaks in between. For example, your child may cry or seem sad one moment, then ask to go out and play the next. Other children may not show any signs of sadness or grief.

Grieving teenagers

While younger children may not fully understand death, teenagers will have a more mature understanding. Teenagers are in a stage of life where they're forming their own identity, thoughts, and emotions. It's common for them to have a wide range of emotions when their parent dies. Some may feel that their identity within the family has changed and may take on adult responsibilities. Teenagers may need privacy as they grieve. Be sure to let them know they can talk to you for support.

Helping your child

Helping your child may be hard as you cope with your own grief. If you're having trouble talking to your child, ask a family member, friend, social worker, psychologist, or religious or spiritual leaders to support and help you.

Here are some ways you can help your child cope with their loss.

Share your own thoughts and feelings

It's normal to want to avoid crying in front of your child, but expressing your emotions can show them healthy coping skills. Share your own feelings about losing your loved one. It can be helpful for your child to hear what you're feeling and can help them express their own feelings. If your family follows a religion or spirituality practice, you may find it helpful to include your beliefs in the conversation.

Be direct when talking about death

Avoid using phrases like "passed" or "went away" when talking about death. This can be confusing for a child and will have them wondering if their parent will wake up or come back. Being honest and direct can help your child understand what has happened and learn healthy ways to cope. Some families use religion or spiritual practices to help a child understand that a parent is not physically here. If you find that helpful, ask a religious or spiritual leader for help.

Honor their memory

Having ways to honor your loved one's memory can be healing for both you and your child. Revisiting family traditions or making new ones is one way you and your family can stay connected to your loved one. Different cultures and faiths have rituals to honor someone's memory. Sometimes families create their own rituals like

getting together for a special meal, planting a garden, visiting one of their favorite places, or celebrating their birthday. Whatever choices you make, remember that there's no right or wrong way to honor a loved one's memory. Try to do what feels most comfortable for your family.

Going to the funeral

The decision to have your child be part of a funeral or memorial service is up to you and your child. Giving your child the option to attend allows them to grieve with their family. If your child attends the funeral, make sure to let them know what to expect beforehand. You may also want to think of ways to include them in the ceremony. They can write a letter or draw a picture to put in the casket or make a collage of photos of their parent to display.

At the funeral, be mindful about how your child is feeling and check in on them. You may find it helpful to arrange to have someone your child trusts to take breaks with them. If your child wants to leave the room, let them. Your child may have more questions about death after the funeral or memorial service.

Resources for you and your family

MSK resources

No matter where you are in the world, there's support available to you and your family. MSK offers a range of resources for grieving families and friends. You can learn more about these resources at www.mskcc.org/experience/caregivers-support/support-grieving-family-friends

Talking with Children About Cancer Program

Talking with Children About Cancer is a program to help support adults receiving cancer treatment as they parent their children and teenagers. Our social workers offer family support groups, individual and group counseling, connections to resources, and guidance for professionals in the community including school social workers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, teachers, and school staff. To learn more visit, www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/talking-with-children

Bereavement Program

646-888-4889

MSK offers services through our Bereavement Program to help family and friends who have lost a loved one. People who have lost someone close to them to cancer may find it

helpful to talk with others who are also grieving. The Departments of Social Work and Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences offer support groups and education programs for people who have lost someone to cancer. Services include short term individual counseling, resources for bereaved children, bereavement groups for adults, and links to community resources.
To learn more, or to join a bereavement support group, call the Social Work Department at 646-888-4889.

MSK Counseling Center

646-888-0200
Some bereaved families find counseling helpful. Our psychiatrists and psychologists lead a bereavement clinic that provides counseling and support to individuals, couples, and families who are grieving, as well as medicine to help if you feel depressed.

Spiritual Care

212-639-5982
Our chaplains are available to listen, help support family members, pray, contact community clergy or faith groups, or to simply be a comforting person and a spiritual presence. Anyone can request spiritual support, regardless of formal religious affiliation.

Additional resources

There are books, educational resources, and community support programs available for parents and children. For more information about these programs, call your social worker or visit www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/talking-with-children/resources

Helpful websites

Bright Spot Network

www.brightspotnetwork.com

This is a national nonprofit that offers resources, education, and support to families experiencing a cancer diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship. They focus on young parents and guardians caring for young children at the time of diagnosis, including those diagnosed during pregnancy.

The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families

www.dougy.org

The Dougy Center provides support to grieving children, teens, young adults, and families. They provide online resources and tools to help support and guide families who are grieving.

Red Door Community

212-647-9700

www.reddoorcommunity.org
Provides meeting places for people living with cancer and their family and friends. Gives people a place where they can meet others to build support systems. Offers free support and networking groups, lectures, workshops, and social events. Red Door Community used to be called Gilda's Club.

Helpful books

Books for adults to help children and teens cope with grief

Guiding Your Child Through Grief
Author: James P. Emswiler

The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide
Author: Helen Fitzgerald

Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grown Ups
Author: William C. Kroen

How Do We Tell the Children? A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children Two to Teen Cope When Someone Dies
Author: Dan Schaefer and Christine Lyons

Preparing Your Children for Goodbye: A Guidebook for Dying Parents
Author: Lori Hedderman

Take My Hand: Guiding Your Child Through Grief
Author: Sharon Marshall

Talking about Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child
Author: Earl A. Grollman

Books for children about death, dying, and grief

Always by My Side
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Susan Kerner

Everett Anderson's Goodbye
For ages 5 to 8
Author: Lucille Clifton

Gentle Willow: A Story for Children about Dying
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Joyce C. Mills

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf
For ages 4 and up
Author: Leo Buscaglia

The Goodbye Book
For ages 3 to 6
Author: Todd Parr

Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children

For ages 5 and older
Author: Bryan Mellonie

The Memory Box: A Book about Grief
For ages 4 to 9
Author: Joanna Rowland

I Miss You: A First Look at Death
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Pat Thomas and Leslie Harker

The Next Place
For ages 5 and older
Author: Warren Hanson

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss
For ages 6 to 9
Author: Michaelene Mundy

Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping with the Loss of a Parent
For ages 5 to 8
Author: Julie Kaplow and Donna Pincus

Saying Goodbye to Daddy
For ages 4 and older
Author: Judith Vigna

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss
For ages 8 and older
Author: Pat Schwiebert

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?
For ages 5 to 10
Author: Trevor Romain

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death
For ages 4 to 7
Author: Laurie Kransy Brown and Marc Brown

Where Are You? A Child's Book about Loss
For ages 4 to 8
Author: Laura Olivieri

Activity books for children about death, dying, and grief

Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies
For ages 5 to 8
Author: Janis Silverman

When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief
For ages 9 to 12
Author: Marge Heegaard

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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