

Supporting a Child During a Loved One's Illness & Death

If you are old enough to love, you are old enough to grieve.

—Anonymus

When a loved one is seriously ill

Talking with the Children

This “Talking with the Children” section is adapted with permission from a special report by Julia Lawrence for *The Seattle Times*.

Our first instinct may be to protect children from the harsh realities of a loved one's serious illness. But children are good “lie detectors.” They can sense anxiety and are aware of when their routines are disrupted. If children are not given honest explanations, they may arrive at their own conclusions. They may start to take on the blame for their loved one having the illness.

Instead of withholding the truth from children, try these tips to help ease your child through a loved one's diagnosis and treatment:

- Begin by asking the child what he or she already thinks is happening.
- Find out what the child wants to know.
- Tell the truth and tell it early. Information helps the child feel less helpless and more involved in the family's process.
- Tell them the name of the disease, where it is, and how it will be treated. You do not need to include every small detail. Use language they will understand.
- Tell the child's teacher what is going on. The teacher can address any major changes in the child's behavior.
- Keep reassuring the child. Treatment for a serious illness may mean that their loved one is often away from home. Children need to know they are not being abandoned. They need help trusting that the adults will do everything possible to provide the safety, security and love that they need.
- Tell the child it is not their fault. Children will often think that bad things happen because they were misbehaving.
- Let the child have a wide range of emotions or reactions. Accepting a loved one's diagnosis is difficult. Letting children express themselves is healthy and helps them adjust.

- Answer all the child's questions. Children may ask such direct questions such as, “Will she die? Will you die, too?” Always give answers that are honest and as optimistic as the situation allows. To avoid these questions will only worsen the situation.
- Keep in mind that children tend to respond to their parents' emotions. It is OK for your child to see you cry or express sorrow.

If the Loved One Is Not Getting Better

If the illness is not responding to treatment, help grieving children by letting them know that their loved one is not getting better, even though that person is trying very hard. If the illness does not respond to treatment, adults can reassure children that, together, the family will face whatever comes.

The children need to know that:

- They are safe and loved.
- They did not cause the illness by something they did or did not do, such as being angry at the loved one or not doing their chores.

If Death Is Likely

Include the children by talking with them about what is going on. They will notice changes in your behavior. It will help them to feel involved.

Children may want to visit their loved one before death. If they visit, do not force them and do not keep them from touching their loved one.

You can also involve the children in legacy work such as making handprints of the loved one during a visit.

If children do not want to visit, they could write a letter or draw a picture for their loved one.

After a death

- **Let the children decide** whether or not they want to attend the memorial, no matter what their age.
- **Help the children find ways to remember their loved one.** You may want to talk about the person, ask the children to tell you a story about the person, paint a special rock or plant a tree in their honor, or have a special place in the home where the loved one's photo is kept.

- **Allow for a variety of grief reactions.** At times, children might cry or be angry. At other times, they might isolate themselves or withdraw for a while. Talk about how each member of the family might be grieving in different ways. Some people grieve emotionally – they might cry, sigh or be irritable. Other people feel grief physically – they might get stomachaches or headaches, or gain or lose weight. Ask each other what you need to ease your grief.
- **Be prepared for repetition.** Children of all ages may ask the same questions over and over. Be patient and respectful of their need to fully understand what happened.
- **Realize that children take breaks from grief.** A child’s grief reactions are different from adult grief reactions. Children may express deep sorrow one moment and then quickly run off playing and laughing. Their grief tends to come and go quickly, and may return at unexpected times.

For the parent or caregiver

Seek support for yourself as you grieve. Find ways to address your emotional, physical, social and spiritual needs.

Support might include:

- Talking with a friend, family member, counselor, spiritual care provider, community leader, or other trusted adult
- Massage, walking, exercise, stretching, napping
- A night out with adults while children stay with a sitter
- Finding joy within the sorrow, being open to happiness, seeking joy

Also, plan some fun family time. Let the kids choose an activity and help them plan it. (You can veto the plan if the activity is too costly or time-consuming.)

Resources

General information about grief: centerforloss.com

Information on parenting: healthychildren.org

Tacoma-area support for children (Bridges): 253.403.1966, marybridge.org/services/bridges-center-for-grieving-children/

Seattle-area support for children (Safe Crossings): 206.225.5816, providence.org/locations/wa/hospice-of-seattle/safe-crossings-pediatric-grief-program

What to expect

This table shows what to expect from children of different ages and gives tips on how to help them grieve.

Age Range	Common Reaction	How to Help
Birth to age 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Very little or no understanding of death ■ Affected most by the caregiver’s mood ■ Toddlers may demand more attention than usual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintain usual routines ■ Provide love, attention and reassurance ■ Be sure you also find support for yourself
Ages 3 to 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does not see death as permanent ■ Worries about the loved one who died ■ May play-act events around the death ■ May regress to younger behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintain usual routines ■ Patiently and honestly answer questions as often as the child asks ■ Allow the child to express feelings through talking, drawing or play-acting ■ Use concrete words such as “died” or “death”; do not compare death to “going to sleep”
Ages 6 to 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ May feel responsible for the death ■ May want to talk about the death over and over ■ Feelings may range from none, to sorrow, to distressed ■ May worry about other deaths or fear being abandoned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ If leaving the house, tell the child when you plan to return and how to reach you ■ Listen to the child’s thoughts and feelings without judgment ■ Answer questions honestly ■ Reassure the child that the death was not their fault

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