



When a Parent Dies

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All children, no matter how young or old, are affected by the death of someone they love, especially when that someone is their mom or dad. The following is a list of important things to consider when dealing with a grieving child whose parent has died.

- The death of someone loved, especially that of a parent, shakes a child's sense of security. Often the next overwhelming thought is "Is my *other* parent going to die, too? If so, who will take care of *me*?" Clingy or regressive behavior is very common for the first weeks or months following the death.
- It is very important to attempt to maintain the child's daily routine if all possible. This continuity helps provide the child with some sense of security and stability during a time full of uncertainty.
- Young children often exhibit "magical thinking" in which they believe the things they say or do can affect their world. Furthermore, children often feel they are to blame for the death. The result: a child might believe that if only he or she had cleaned their room more, then mommy wouldn't have died; or, if he or she is very, very good now, mommy will come back and not be dead any more.
- Children who have experienced the death of a parent often feel very different from their peers – that somehow they even *look* different to others now. A child's self-esteem is greatly affected as he or she sometimes assumes that they are the only ones on earth who have had a parent die. Being around other children who have experienced a similar loss is very beneficial.
- We must choose our words carefully so as not to place unfair burdens upon a child: "*You are the man of the house now*" or "*You need to be strong for/take care of your mommy now.*" Children take these statements literally, and in trying to help, we may instead stifle a child's grief.
- Grieving children are very sensitive and perceptive as well as protective of those around them. They may decide not to express their grief openly because they do not want to risk "making mommy or daddy cry."
- It is very important for children to see the adults around them express grief. This gives the child "permission" to do the same.
- Children need an outlet for their grief feelings. There are many *appropriate* methods of expression: talking, crying, writing, drawing, sports, punching a pillow, etc. Be certain that the child is still expected to abide by "the rules". If temper tantrums weren't allowed before, they also should not be allowed now.
- Grief causes difficulty in concentration. Children often experience a shortened attention span, and school work is often affected. It is important that the teacher be informed about any loss a child is enduring.
- A very young child who has had a parent die may grieve again as he or she grows older and develops new understanding of the meaning of the death.
- Encourage the child's thoughts, discussion, or creativity in terms of his or her memories of the person who has died. This helps the child to understand and have hope that even though someone has died, he or she can continue to live within our hearts forever.

