

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

SUPPORTING AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGED CHILD AFTER LOSS

Grief can be overwhelming for kids and adults, and might leave you with questions about how to handle new behaviors and emotional responses. Here are some things to consider and try with your child...

- **Give simple, accurate information about the death**

Children this age often have questions about what happened to their person, why it happened, what happened to the person's body, etc. They may openly ask questions, or may create answers in their own minds if information is not given to them. You can give simple explanations such as:

"Mom died in an accident. She was hurt so badly that the doctors could not fix what was wrong. Her body no longer works, and she can't get better."

"Dad died from a heart attack. That means that his heart stopped working and could not start again. Nothing he, or you, or anyone else did made him die or could have stopped him from dying."

- **Reassure them that they are safe and will be cared for**

Children might be afraid that they will not be taken care of or confused about who will do things that the person who died used to do. Talk about who will take care of them, including specific parts of their day, such as who will make dinner for them or take them to school. As children learn more about causes of death, they may be more concerned about others becoming ill, being in accidents, etc. You can remind them of their support network as well as things they and others do to stay safe.

- **Support routines**

Children and adults thrive on routines, and children find routines comforting, especially when they are experiencing changes. Try to create and maintain a regular routine, especially around the beginning and end of the day. Children may benefit from being involved in planning routines, especially if their daily routines must change because of the death.



- **Offer choices**

When many changes are occurring at once, children may feel that they don't have much control over their lives. Offering even small choices, such as what to pack for their lunch, or what toy they can bring in the car, can help increase their sense of control.

- **Remain flexible**

Like adults, children often demonstrate decreased capacity when they are sad, scared or unsettled. They may demonstrate developmental regression, having a hard time with skills they recently acquired, or requiring more reassurance than usual. Make space for children to need additional help and support within their routines and offer flexibility around nonessential tasks.

- **Expect and support big emotions**

Children may be more anxious, clingy, sad, angry, or may show less emotion than usual. Model using words for feelings and healthy ways to let feelings out. Emotional vocabulary is often difficult for young children; practice modeling and scripting emotional language, rather than asking for it directly ("You looked sad when we talked about dad not taking you to school anymore").

- **Make space for big energy and play**

Children always need space and places to run, jump, climb, and engage in gross motor activity. This is even more important during times of increased stress. Create opportunities where it is okay for them to be loud, messy, and active, as well as spaces for creative play and art.

- **Remember the person together**

Talk about the person who died, look at pictures, create art, and consider other ways to express memories of the person. Children are likely to have some of their own memories and will need help to remember other things. Talking about your own memories or looking at reminders such as pictures and mementos from shared activities, can support your child's memories of the person who died.

