

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

SUPPORTING A PRESCHOOL 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 preschooler...

- **Give short, literal explanations**

Children this age do not have an understanding of abstract concepts, and often have questions about what happened or where the person is now. You can give explanations such as:

"Dad died. That means his body stopped working and he can't see or hear or talk anymore."

"Dad died, which means he won't be (at home, at your soccer game, etc.). We won't see him anymore, but we can do things that help us remember him."

Use literal language, rather than phrases such as "passed away" or "fell asleep", as these can be confusing or scary for young children.

- **Reassure them that they will be cared for**

Young 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 read stories before bed.

- **Support routines**

Children and adults thrive on routines, and young 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.

- **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 color shirt they would like to wear, or where to sit at the table, can help increase their sense of control.

- **Remain flexible**

Young children often 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.

- **Expect and support big emotions**

Young 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.

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

Young 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. Young children may not have as many explicit memories of the person who died but still feel the connection.

