

# How to Help Children After A Traumatic Death



For most children, death is a new experience. And like all new experiences, the unknown can be confusing and frightening. Most children do not know what to expect following the loss of a family member or friend. Young children may not understand what death really means and may be confused or even frightened by the reactions of other family members. In the case of traumatic death, the confusion and fear is even greater.

For adults, death is more familiar and the grieving process is something many adults know first hand. Most adults have experienced the range of feelings that often come with traumatic loss - anger, confusion and sadness, and have learned ways to cope with loss. This may not be the case for children, particularly young children.

At the same time, children will seek answers and comfort from their caregivers and other adults in their lives. Yet in the face of traumatic death, adults often feel helpless in this role. While adults cannot have answers to all the questions that children may have about death, they can help children better understand the grieving process.

Over time, the ability of the child to cope is related to the ability of the child to understand. While some elements of death and tragedy will always remain beyond understanding, explain this to the child: "I don't know, some things we can never really understand." If the child feels that they share the unknown and unknowable with an adult, they feel safer. Don't let the child develop a sense that there is a secret about the event — this can be very destructive.

## What can I do to help?

**1. Be honest, open and clear.** Whenever possible, adults should give children the facts regarding the death. While there is no need to describe great lingering detail, the important details should be given. These may be horrifying, but it is always important to give factual information to the child. The imagination of a child will "fill in" the details if they are not given. Too often, these imagined details are distorted, inaccurate, and more horrifying than the actual details, and can ultimately interfere with the long-term healing process.

**2. Do not avoid the topic when the child brings it up.** Similar to other trauma, the adults around the child need to be available when the child wants to talk, but should avoid probing when the child does not want to talk. This may mean answering one question, or struggling with a very difficult question. "Does it hurt when you burn to death?" Don't be surprised if in the middle of your struggle for the "right" answer, the child returns to play and acts disinterested. The child has been unable to tolerate the level of emotional intensity and are coping with it by avoiding it at that point.

Children will sense if the topic is emotionally difficult for adults around them. A child will try to please adults by either avoiding emotional topics or persisting with topics that she senses they find more pleasant. Try to gauge your own sense of discomfort and directly address this with the child. It is reassuring to children that they are not alone in some of their emotional upset.

Children look to adults to understand and interpret their own inner states. Younger children will even mirror the nature and intensity of an adult's emotions. So if you feel you will be unable to control your emotions when you are trying to help the child, you will need to use some coping strategies yourself. Take a few moments, collect yourself and then try to help the child. It is only human to lose control and be very emotional in these moments. After you feel more composed, you can help



the child understand how you were overcome with emotion, “Just like you feel sometimes.” Explain that you struggle to understand too — that “We need to help each other when we are sad.”

**3. Be prepared to discuss the same details again and again.** Expect to hear things from the child that seem as if they didn’t “hear” you when you told them the first time. The powerful, pervasive implications of death for the child can be overwhelming indeed. The child’s responses to death of a parent, sibling, or other loved one will be similar to the child’s responses to other traumatic events. This will include emotional numbing, avoidance, sadness, regression, episodic manifestations of anger, frustration, fear of the unknown (e.g., the future), helplessness, and confusion.

The child will have recurring, intrusive, and emotionally evocative recollections of the loved one, and about the death of the loved one. If there is no clear image of the death, the child will imagine various scenarios. These images will return over and over again. As they do, the child (if she feels safe and supported by the adults around her) will ask about death, the specifics of the death, and the loved one.

Patiently, repeat clear, honest facts for the child. If you don’t know something — or if you also have wondered about the nature of death or a detail in this specific loss — tell the child. Help the child explore possible explanations, and help the child understand that you and others can and do live with many unknowns. In this process, let the child know, however, that there are things we do know — things we can understand. Bring positive memories, images and recollections of the loved one into the conversation.

**4. Be available, nurturing, reassuring, and predictable.** All of these things make the child’s work easier. She feels safe and cared for. The loss of parents, siblings and other loved ones is extremely traumatic, and will forever change these children’s lives. The child has, in some sense, a lifelong task of working, re-working — experiencing and re-experiencing the loss of these loved ones. Each holiday, each family occasion, will bring the loss, the death, and the ghost of the loved one to this child. Available, nurturing, and caring caregivers, teachers, therapists, and caseworkers will all make this journey easier.

**5. Understand that surviving children often feel guilty.** A child surviving when family members die may often feel guilty. This can be a very destructive and pervasive belief. The guilt children feel is related to the false assumptions they make about the event. An important principle in this process is that children do not know how to verbalize or express guilt in the same fashion as adults. Guilt, as expressed by children, may often be best observed in behaviors and emotions that are related to self-hatred and self-destruction. The child will not likely be able to articulate that survivor guilt is intimately related to their sense of worthlessness or self-abusive/destructive behaviors.

The children surviving a parent’s sudden death will have great survivor guilt. “Was there something wrong or bad about me? I could have been there — I should have been there.” These thoughts will recur in any variety of permutations. And most of the time, the outcome of these thoughts will be guilt. If these children’s caregivers, teachers, and therapists can minimize these potentially escalating and destructive ideas, the child’s recovery will be eased.

**6. Take advantage of other resources.** There are many other well-trained professionals willing to help you and the child in your care with these problems. Take advantage of them. Always remember that the loss does not go away, but the way children experience loss will change with time, hopefully maturing in ways that make it easier to bear. The traumatic loss of a parent, a sibling, and a peer will always be with these children. With time, love, and understanding, however, children can learn to carry the burdens of traumatic loss in ways that will not interfere with their healthy development.

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