

Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: When a Child Has Lost a Parent

This is one of six documents covering topics to help children when someone in the family has cancer. The others cover information on: diagnosis, treatment, recurrence or progressive illness, terminal illness, and psychosocial support services. Even though this information is directed mainly toward adults who are helping children who have lost a parent, it can apply to the loss of any adult who was an important part of the child's life. For more information on these and other topics, go to the "To Learn More" section.

Grief can look different in a child.

When a person loses someone who is important to them, grieving is natural and expected. Over time, it can allow the person to accept and understand their loss. Grieving involves many different emotions over time, all of which help the person come to terms with the loss of a loved one. But in children, grief can take longer. And it's often worked through on different levels as the child matures.

Children of all ages go through grief, sadness, and despair after the loss of a parent to cancer, even though the process might look different from that in adults. Children often will feel sad or show other emotions for a short time, then go back to their usual activities or go play with friends. Adults might mistakenly think that the child has already gotten over it, or that the child doesn't fully understand the loss. But children grieve in their own ways, often showing emotion for awhile then going back to more everyday things. This can go on for years after the death.

If the parent had a long and difficult battle with cancer, sometimes the child may seem less anxious after the death than before. It's hard having a very sick parent, and the child may be able to settle into a quieter routine while handling their grief. But caregivers need to keep checking in with the child—listen to concerns and find out if the child has questions. This can be hard at times, because children often respond in ways that may make them seem unconcerned, callous, or indifferent. It helps to remember that children feel the pain of loss, but are not able to express it the same way that adults do. It can take a long time to adapt to losing a parent.

Sometimes emotional symptoms can become more severe and interfere with the child's or the family's life. About 1 in 5 children have serious emotional symptoms a year or more after the parent's death. A 2011 study showed that, 2 months after losing a parent, 1 in 4 children were depressed. In contrast, other studies have shown a much lower risk of serious problems such as

depression in children who didn't have emotional or behavioral problems or other serious family problems before the parent's death. And one study suggested that some children have a delayed response to the death and an increase in emotional problems 2 years after the death. It's uncertain how long this period of adjustment might last after the loss of a parent, and it varies from child to child.

Mourning and bereavement

Bereavement is what a person goes through when someone close to them dies. It's the state of having suffered a loss.

Mourning is an outward expression of loss and grief. Mourning includes rituals and formal actions like funerals, memorial services, prayers, wearing certain colors or symbolic clothing, and many other customs that depend on culture, religion, and personal preferences. These rituals are usually set up by adults, but they can also be helpful to a bereaved child if the child wants to be included in them.

Bereavement and mourning are both part of the normal grieving process.

Helping a child after a parent's death

The surviving parent or caregiver is a key part of helping a child adapt to the death of a parent. Studies have shown that the quality of the relationship with the child and how well the surviving parent is able to parent are the best predictors of how well the child adapts. Things that might help a child include:

- Keep an open channel of communication with the child.
- Continue to talk about and share information about the parent's life and death with the child.
- As the caregiver, try to remain emotionally healthy—if you need extra help, get it.
- Work to be a loving family that sticks together and supports one another.

As the child matures, their understanding of what happened to their parent – and to them – may change and deepen. They may have more questions, or ask questions that you've answered before. Keep answering the questions honestly, and check to find out how much the child understands. They may need more support from you to correct misperceptions from their younger years, and integrate this extra information at their new level of understanding. This probably will happen a number of times as they get older.

Some pointers about dealing with children just before and right after the parent's death are given in *Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing With a Parent's Terminal Illness.* You can read this on our Web site at www.cancer.org, or call us for a copy. It includes information on how children of different ages cope and how to help them.

Signs that a child may need extra help after a parent's death

Depression and complicated grief in children can look different from an adult's. For instance, a common sign of depression in a child is a change in behavior, like sudden changes in grades, withdrawal, or losing friends. Some children seem more angry and irritable than depressed.

Complicated grief is different from the usual grieving process. It's marked by how long it lasts, how much it interferes with the child's life, or by how severe it is. Sometimes, a child will seem to be stuck in the process of grieving. Grief reactions or mourning processes like this are not only unusual, but are also unhealthy. If it's severe and lingers, the child might need professional help to get through the grieving process.

These problems can show up months or even years after the parent's death. If a child seems to be having trouble, it may mean a more serious problem than the usual grief response to losing a parent. Extra help is needed if a child:

- Is unable to handle the feelings of sadness
- Feels sad all the time
- Cannot be comforted
- Admits to thinking of suicide or of hurting himself or herself
- Feels extra irritable
- Becomes very angry very quickly
- Has changing grades
- Withdraws or isolates himself or herself
- Acts very different from usual
- Has appetite changes
- Has low energy
- Shows less interest in activities
- Has trouble concentrating
- Cries a lot
- Has trouble sleeping

When a child shows 1 or 2 of these symptoms, it may help to offer more support. But if the usual ways of handling these problems are not working, or if the problem goes on for more than 1 or 2 weeks, the child may need extra help. (For more serious problems, like if the child is thinking about hurting himself or herself, urgent help is needed.)

It may help to talk to the child's pediatrician, school counselor, or with the social worker or counseling staff at the hospital where the parent was treated. These experts know how other

children have responded to situations like this, so they may be able to offer ways to help with the problem. They can evaluate the child and make sure that any needed help is given. They may also be able to suggest books, videos, and children's support groups that may help. Rarely, a child may need to see a psychiatrist for medicine or counseling.

How do I find out more about loss?

This short introduction is offered to help you get started looking into deeper and ongoing resources to help a child who has lost a parent. We have included a list of books, Web sites, and organizations that you can use to help your child.

As the surviving parent, you have also had a major loss with this death. You might want to learn more about coping with your own grief and loss, too. Remember that children cope better when their caregiver is emotionally healthy, so don't hesitate to ask for help for yourself if you think you need it. For more information on dealing with adult grief, see *Coping With the Loss of a Loved One*. You can read it on our Web site, www.cancer.org, or call us at 1-800-227-2345 and ask for a copy.

Some of the resources below also deal with adult grief.

If you need information for families who have lost a child, please contact us for *Resources for Parents and Families Who Have Lost a Child to Cancer*, or read it on our Web site.

To learn more

The following list of books, Web sites, and organizations may provide useful information for people who are going through a loss or discussing death with children.

National organizations and Web sites*

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

GriefNet

Web site for adults: www.griefnet.org Web site for children: http://kidsaid.com

Online groups for adult grief support; separate online support groups for children under 12 and for teens (with consent from parent or guardian)

The Centering Corporation

Toll-free number: 1-866-218-0101 Web site: www.centering.org

Information and resources on bereavement and loss, for children and adults

Kids Konnected

Toll-free number: 1-800-899-2866 (If you get voicemail, leave a message to get a call back) Web site: www.kidskonnected.org

For children and teens who have a parent with cancer and for those who have lost a parent to cancer

The Dougy Center

Toll-free number: 1-866-775-5683

Web site: www.dougy.org

Information for grieving children, teens, and adults. They refer to programs across the country and around the world that serve grieving children, teens, and their families.

You may also want to contact your local hospice or hospital for bereavement support groups in your area.

Other publications*

Books for adults

Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals by Earl A. Grollman. Published by Beacon Press, 1996.

The Bereaved Parent by Harriet Sarnoff Schiff. Published by Penguin, 1977.

The Bereaved Parents' Survival Guide by Juliet Cassuto Rothman. Published by Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997.

Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope With Death and Bereavement. (Professional Practices in Adult Education and Human Resource) by David W. Adams and Eleanor J. Deveau. Published by Baywood Publishing Company, 1995.

Children's Conceptions of Death by Richard Lonetto. Published by Springer, 1980. (Check cancer center reading room, libraries, or online for used copies.)

Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies by J.William Worden. Published by Guilford Press, 1996.

Explaining Death to Children by Earl Grollman. Published by Beacon Press, 1987.

Gili's Book: A Journey Into Bereavement for Parents and Counselors by Henya Kagan Klein. Published by Teachers College Press, 1998.

Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies Theresa A. Rando. Published by Lexington Books: 1995.

Guiding Your Child Through Grief by James P. and Mary Ann Emswiler. Published by Bantam, 2000.

Helping Children Cope with Death by Donna L. Schuurman. Published by the Dougy Center, 1997. Also available in Spanish.

Helping Children Cope With the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grownups by William C. Kroen and Pamela Espeland. Published by Free Spirit Publishing, 1996.

Healing Children's Grief: Surviving a Parent's Death From Cancer by Grace Christ. Published by Oxford University Press, 2000.

Helping Children Cope With the Death of a Parent: A Guide for the First Year by Paddy Greenwall Lewis and Jessica G. Lippman. Published by Praeger Publishers, 2004.

Helping Teens Cope with Death published by the Dougy Center, 1999.

It's Okay to Cry: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Through the Losses of Life (Workbook) by Norman Wright. Published by Waterbrook Press, 2004.

Never the Same: Coming to Terms With the Death of a Parent by Donna Schuurman. Published by St. Martin's Press, 2003.

On Children and Death: How Children and Their Parents Can and Do Cope With Death by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Published by Touchstone, 1997.

Relative Grief: Parents and Children, Sisters and Brothers, Husbands, Wives and Partners, Grandparents and Grandchildren Talk About Their Experience of Death and Grief by Dorothy Rowe, Judy Merry, and Clare Jenkins. Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005.

Talking With Children About Loss: Words, Strategies, and Wisdom to Help Children Cope With Death, Divorce, and Other Difficult Times by Maria Trozzie. Published by Childhood Education, 2000.

35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child by the Dougy Center Staff. Published by The Dougy Center, 1999. Also available in Spanish.

Understanding Children's Experiences of Parental Bereavement by John Holland. Published by Kingsley Publishers, 2001.

What About the Kids? Understanding Their Needs in Funeral Planning and Services by The Dougy Center for Grieving Children. Published by the Dougy Center, 1999.

When a Parent Has Cancer: A Guide to Caring for Your Children by Wendy S. Harpham. Published by William Morrow Paperbacks, 2004.

When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal With Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses by John W James, Russell Friedman, and Dr. Leslie Landon Matthews. Published by HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

Books for children

A Candle for Grandpa: A Guide to the Jewish Funeral for Children and Parents by David Techner, Judith Hirt-Manheimer, and Joel Iskowitz. Published by Urg Press, 1993. Ages 4 to 8.

A Complete Book About Death for Kids by Earl Grollman and Joy Johnson. Published by Centering Corporation, 2006. Ages 4 to 8.

A Pillow for My Mom by Clarissa Sgourous and Christine Ross. Published by Houghton Mifflin/Walter Lorraine Books, 1998. Ages 5 to 9.

After Charlotte's Mom Died by Cornelia Spelman and Judith Friedman. Published by Albert Whitman & Co., 1996. Ages 5 to 7.

After the Funeral by Jane Loretta Winsch. Published by Paulist Press, 1995. Ages 4 to 8.

Always and Forever by Alan Durant and Debi Gliori. Published by Harcourt Children's Books, 2004. Preschool to grade 3.

And Still They Bloom by Amy Rovere. Published by the American Cancer Society, 2012. Ages 9-12.

Anna's Corn by Barbara Santucci and Lloyd Bloom. Published by Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2002. Ages 4 to 8.

Bluebird Summer by Deborah Hopkinson and Bethanne Andersen. Published by Greenwillow, 2001. Ages 4 to 8.

Don't Despair on Thursdays!: The Children's Grief-Management Book (The Emotional Impact Series) by Adolph Moser and David Melton. Published by Landmark Editions, 1996. Ages 9 and up.

Facing Change: Coming Together & Falling Apart in the Teen Years. Compassion Press, 2004. Best for teens.

Fire in My Heart: Ice in My Veins by Enid Samuel-Traisman. Published by Centering Corporation, 2003. Best for teens.

Goodbye Mousie by Robie H. Harris and Jan Omerod. Published by Margaret K. McElderry, 2001. Preschool to grade 2.

Grandma's Purple Flowers by Adjoa J. Burrowes. Published by Lee & Low Books, 2000. Ages 4 to 8.

Grandma's Scrapbook by Josephine Nobisso and Maureen Hyde. Published by Gingerbread House, 2000 (Revised edition). Ages 4 to 8.

Grandpa Loved by Josephine Nobisso and Maureen Hyde. Published by Gingerbread House, 2000 (Revised edition). Ages 7 and up.

Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies by Janis Silverman. Published by Fairview Press, 1999. Ages 5 to 9.

How It Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krementz. Published by Knopf, 1988. Ages 7 to 17.

I Know I Made It Happen: Children and Guilt by Lynn Bennett Blackburn. 2003. Published by Centering Corporation. Best for ages 6 to 12.

I Miss You: A First Look At Death by Pat Thomas and Lesley Harker. Published by Barron's Educational Series, 2001. Ages 5 to 9.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. Published by Bantam, 1983. Ages 6 to 11.

My Grieving Journey Book by Donna Shavatt and Eve Shavatt. Published by Paulist Press, 2002. Ages 4 to 8.

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Michaelene Mundy and R.W. Alley. Published by Abbey Press, 2010. Ages 6 and up.

Tear Soup by Pat Schweibert and Chuck DeKlyen. Published by Grief Watch, 2nd Revised Edition, 2001. Ages 8 and up.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages by Leo Buscaglia. Published by Henry Holt & Co, 1982. Ages 4 to 8.

The Saddest Time (An Albert Whitman Prairie Book) by Norma Simon and Jacqueline Rogers. Published by Albert Whitman & Company, reprinted 1992. Ages 4 to 8.

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst. Published by MacMillan Publishing, 1987. Ages 5 and up.

Transitions Along the Way: A Guide to the Dying Process for Children and Young Adults by Stephanie Jonah. Published by Visions, 1999. Ages 9 and up. (May be hard to find; check in the cancer center reading room, libraries, and used books.)

When Bad Things Happen: A Guide to Help Kids Cope (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Ted O'Neal and Robert W. Alley. Published by One Caring Place, Abbey Press, 2003. Ages 6 and up.

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown. Published by Little, Brown, and Company, 1996. Ages 4 to 8.

When a Grandparent Dies: A Kid's Own Remembering Workbook for Dealing With Shiva and the Year Beyond by Nechama Liss-Levenson and Karen Savary. Published by Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995. Ages 4 to 8. (May be hard to find; check in the cancer center reading room, libraries, and used books.)

When Your Grandparent Dies: A Child's Guide to Good Grief (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Victoria Ryan and Robert W. Alley. Published by Abbey Press, 2002. Ages 4 to 8.

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^{*}Inclusion on these lists does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society

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