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

This is one of 6 pieces covering topics to help children when someone in the family has cancer. The others cover things like diagnosis, treatment, recurrence or progressive illness, terminal illness, and psychosocial support services. For more on these and other topics, go to the "To Learn More" section.

Even though this information is written for adults 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.

Grief can look different in a child.

When someone a child loves dies, grieving is natural and expected. Grief is a normal response to loss, and the process should be encouraged, not suppressed. A child's future mental health depends upon them experiencing all aspects of normal grief.

Grieving involves many different emotions over time, all of which help the person come to terms with the loss of a loved one. Children grieve differently from adults, and each child is different too. Each phase of growth and development may bring up new aspects of the loss and the child may grieve over and over. This is true even for children who were infants when the family member died.

Children of all ages grieve after the loss of a parent to cancer, 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 spurts; moving back and forth between grieving and being interested in everyday things. This can go on for years after the death.

If the parent had a long and difficult battle with cancer, the child and others may have started grieving before the actual death. 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:

- **Keeping an open channel of communication with the child.**
- **Continuing to talk about and share information about the parent's life and death with the child.**
- **As the caregiver, trying to remain emotionally healthy yourself – if you need help, get it.**
- **Working 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 website 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 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 could mean a more serious problem than the usual grief response to losing a parent. Extra help is needed if a child:

- Displays or talks about feeling angry, sad, or upset all the time
- Cannot be comforted
- Admits to thinking of suicide or of hurting himself or herself
- Changes from one mood to another 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
- Daydreams or seems distracted a lot of the time

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 aren’t working, or if the problem goes on for more than a couple of weeks, the child may need extra help. (For more serious problems, such as if the child is thinking about hurting himself or herself, help is needed right away.)

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 children tend to react to losses like this, and 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/or 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 websites and organizations that you can use to help your child.

As the surviving parent or guardian, you have also had to deal with this major loss. 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 on dealing with adult grief, see *Coping With the Loss of a Loved One*. You can read it on our website, 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 website.

To learn more

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

The American Cancer Society also has a book that addresses this:

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

Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or visit our bookstore online at www.cancer.org/bookstore to find out about costs or to place an order.

National organizations and websites*

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

GriefNet
Telephone: 734-761-1960
Website for adults: www.griefnet.org
Website for children: http://kidsaid.com

> Information on grief and bereavement; online and email groups for adult grief support; separate online support groups for children under 12 and for teens (with consent from parent or guardian)

The Dougy Center
Toll-free number: 1-866-775-5683
Website: www.dougy.org

Information, books, DVDs, and online activities for grieving children, teens, adults, and their families. They refer to programs across the country and around the world that serve to help children in grief. Some support groups offered, even for very young children.

The Centering Corporation
Toll-free number: 1-866-218-0101
Website: www.centering.org

Information, books, and many other resources on bereavement and loss for children and adults; also has materials in Spanish

Fernside
Telephone: 513-246-9140
Website: www.fernside.org

Offers phone support to parents and guardians with questions or concerns about the needs of grieving children; also has "How to Help" booklets to help adults assist grieving children

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

A support network for children and teens who have lost a parent to cancer

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

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

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For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society
1-800-227-2345 or www.cancer.org