



SUPPORTING A CHILD WHEN THE ADULTS ARE GRIEVING TOO

Caring for a Child While Carrying Your Own Grief

When someone dies, the adults caring for a child may be grieving just as deeply. Parents and caregivers can feel pressure to hide their emotions or appear strong at all times. Children do not need adults who never cry. They need adults who remain emotionally available, explain what is happening, and make sure the child is not asked to carry adult responsibilities.

CHILDREN NOTICE ADULT GRIEF

Even when adults try to hide grief, children often notice tears, silence, fatigue, changes in routine, and conversations behind closed doors. Without explanation, they may imagine something worse or believe they caused the adult's distress.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- The child watches the caregiver closely or repeatedly asks if they are okay.
- They become unusually helpful, quiet, compliant, or reluctant to share their own needs.
- They worry that talking about the person who died will make the adult more upset.

GENTLE REMINDER

A child can witness an adult's grief without becoming responsible for it. Pair honest emotion with the message: "I am sad, and the adults are taking care of what needs to be taken care of."

LET CHILDREN SEE MANAGEABLE EMOTION

It is okay to cry and say, "I am sad because I miss Dad." Pair emotion with reassurance: "I am having a hard moment, and I am still able to take care of you." This teaches that grief can be expressed without making the child responsible for fixing it.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "You do not have to take care of my feelings." "You can tell me when you are sad even if I am sad too." "The adults will handle the adult problems." "If I need extra help, I will ask another grown-up."

BUILD A CIRCLE OF SUPPORT

One grieving adult should not have to meet every need alone. Trusted relatives, friends, teachers, faith-community members, childcare providers, or professionals can provide meals, transportation, companionship, homework help, or simply another dependable adult relationship.





PROTECT THE CHILD FROM ADULT BURDENS

Children may need truthful information about changes that affect them, but they do not need to manage finances, legal conflicts, family disputes, or the emotional wellbeing of adults. Share information in amounts the child can understand and use.

KEEP SMALL ROUTINES WHEN POSSIBLE

- Grief can disrupt family life. Maintaining a few predictable anchors - meals, school, bedtime, weekly activities, or regular contact with familiar people - can help both adults and children feel steadier.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- Older children and teens may look capable enough to become helpers or confidants. Appreciate their contributions while making clear that they are still allowed to be children and have their own grief, needs, friendships, and future.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Children need permission to be children, especially when the adults they love are grieving too.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What might this child be trying to protect the adults from? Who else can help carry practical or emotional responsibilities so the child does not have to?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Additional support may help when caregiver grief makes daily care consistently difficult, when the child has taken on an adult role, or when either the child or caregiver has severe or persistent distress or safety concerns.

A GENTLE CLOSING

Grieving adults do not have to perform strength for children. Honest emotion, dependable care, appropriate boundaries, and support from other adults can show a child that sadness and safety can exist together.

What might this child be trying to protect the adults from? Who else can help carry practical or emotional responsibilities so the child does not have to?

