



GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A PARENT

*Supporting a Child After the Death of a Mother,
Father, or Parental Figure*

The death of a parent or parental figure can change nearly every part of a child's world. Along with missing the person they love, a child may experience changes in routines, caregiving, finances, family roles, home life, school, and their sense of safety. Children need truthful information, dependable care, and repeated reassurance that they will continue to be cared for.

THE LOSS IS BOTH EMOTIONAL AND PRACTICAL

A parent may have been the person who prepared breakfast, attended school events, gave bedtime hugs, provided discipline, coached a team, or offered comfort. Children often grieve the person and the many everyday roles that disappeared with them.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Repeated questions about who will care for them, where they will live, or whether the surviving caregiver will also die.
- Clinginess, anger, withdrawal, sleep changes, concentration difficulties, or renewed dependence.
- Strong reactions around school events, family activities, birthdays, holidays, and milestones.

GENTLE REMINDER

Children may worry about the surviving caregiver even when they do not say so. Concrete information about who will care for them can be deeply reassuring.

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS UNDER THE QUESTIONS

“Who will take me to school?” may be about more than transportation. It may mean, “Is my life still safe?” Give concrete information about caregiving plans and routines. When plans are uncertain, explain what is known today rather than making promises that may change.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: “Dad died, and he cannot come back. I know you wish he could.” “You will be cared for. Here is what will happen this week.” “You can love Mom, miss her, be angry, and still have good days.”

LET THE PARENT REMAIN PART OF THE CHILD'S STORY

Use the parent's name, share age-appropriate stories, keep photographs available, and allow the child to ask about them. Continuing bonds can include traditions, favorite foods, music, objects, sayings, faith practices, or conversations about what the parent taught the child.





SUPPORT THE SURVIVING CAREGIVER TOO

The adult caring for the child may be grieving deeply while also handling practical responsibilities. Children do not need a caregiver who never cries; they need to know that adult feelings are not theirs to fix. Additional trusted adults can provide stability and respite.

WATCH FOR CHANGES IN FAMILY ROLES

- Children may try to become “the man of the house,” a substitute parent, or the emotional caretaker of surviving adults. Appreciate helpfulness while making clear that adult responsibilities remain with adults.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- A child will often re-grieve a parent's death as they mature. New milestones can reveal new dimensions of the loss: learning to drive, graduating, dating, marrying, becoming a parent, or making major life decisions.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

A parent's death changes a child's story, but it does not erase the relationship. Love, memory, influence, and connection can continue as the child grows.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What part of this parent's role does the child seem to miss most right now? What dependable person, routine, memory, or connection can support that need?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Seek additional support when grief reactions are severe, persistent, worsening, unsafe, or significantly interfering with daily life, relationships, school, sleep, or eating.

A GENTLE CLOSING

A parent cannot be replaced, but a child can continue to grow surrounded by truthful care, dependable adults, memories, and permission to maintain a lifelong connection with the person who died.

What part of this parent's role does the child seem to miss most right now? What dependable person, routine, memory, or connection can support that need?

