



BIRTHDAYS, HOLIDAYS, ANNIVERSARIES, AND SPECIAL DAYS

*Helping Children Navigate Meaningful Days After
Someone Dies*

Birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, school celebrations, vacations, and family traditions can feel different after someone dies. Children may look forward to a special day and still feel sadness, anger, worry, or longing when it arrives. Adults can help by preparing for the day, allowing mixed emotions, and giving the child choices about remembrance and participation.

WHY SPECIAL DAYS CAN FEEL DIFFERENT

Special days often highlight who is missing. Traditions may bring strong memories, and children may notice practical changes such as an empty chair, a missing phone call, or a different person carrying out a familiar role. Anticipation can sometimes be harder than the day itself.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- The child may become emotional, irritable, quiet, worried, or unusually excited before an important date.
- They may want to keep a tradition exactly the same - or avoid it completely.
- A reaction may appear before or after the date rather than on the day itself.

GENTLE REMINDER

A child does not have to choose between remembering and enjoying. Missing someone and experiencing happiness can exist on the same day.

PLAN WITH THE CHILD

Talk about upcoming days before they arrive. Ask what the child would like to keep, change, skip, or add. Adults can make the final decisions when necessary, but offering age-appropriate choices gives the child some control in a situation that has already involved enormous change.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "This birthday may feel different because Grandpa is not here." "We can miss Mom and still enjoy part of the holiday." "Would you like to do something to remember him, or would you rather keep the day simple?"

MAKE ROOM FOR MIXED FEELINGS

A child can be excited about presents, friends, food, or a celebration and still deeply miss the person who died. Joy does not erase grief, and grief does not require a child to give up joy. Avoid making the child feel guilty for enjoying the day.





CREATE OPTIONAL WAYS TO REMEMBER

Light a candle, prepare a favorite food, display a photograph, visit a meaningful place, tell a story, play a favorite song, write a note, or include the person's name in a family tradition. Remembrance should be an invitation, not an obligation.

BE FLEXIBLE WITH TRADITIONS

- Some traditions may be comforting; others may feel too painful this year. Families can change a tradition temporarily or permanently. Children benefit from knowing that changing how a day is observed does not mean forgetting the person who died.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- As children grow, the meaning of special days changes. A child may grieve differently at a graduation, performance, wedding, or milestone years after the death because they now understand more fully who is missing.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Traditions can change without love changing. What matters most is creating space for memory, choice, connection, and whatever feelings the day brings.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What special day is approaching? What part may be hardest for this child, and what choice or remembrance could make the day feel more manageable?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

If anticipation of special days causes severe or persistent distress, major disruption in functioning, or significant anxiety, consider additional support from an appropriate qualified professional.

A GENTLE CLOSING

There is no requirement to make special days look the way they did before the death. Families can carry love and memory forward while creating traditions that fit the life they are living now.

What special day is approaching? What part may be hardest for this child, and what choice or remembrance could make the day feel more manageable?

