

10 Steps for Parenting Your Grieving Children



“With compassionate wisdom the authors give us practical insight into how to transform youngsters' guilt, pain, and anger into acceptance, self-esteem, and love. This monumental contribution will bring solace to many grieving hearts.”

Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, DHL, DD author of
*Talking about Death: A Dialogue Between
Parent and Child*

Anne Hatcher Berenberg, Ph.D.,
Vicki Scalzitti, and Jack Cain

10 Steps for Parenting Your Grieving Children

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10 Steps for Parenting Your Grieving Children

A framework for thinking about your children's grief

- The goal is to support your children in their natural healing.
- You are working through your own grief at the same time as you are helping your children.
- You may be afraid that your children have been or will be damaged by their loss and bereavement.
- Children process what has happened and is happening according to their own developmental level. A small child, a school age child, and a teenager will all understand and experience the death of an important person differently—and that will change for each one of them over time.
- Children's grief looks different from adult grief.
- Children will need to re-work their understanding of death and/or loss again at each developmental level. Expect this to happen.

Step 1:

LET GRIEF HAPPEN

Emma and Sammy were in the family room watching a television special when their daddy came home late from work. He said hello to them, then had a late supper with their mother, Laura. When the show was over, 5-year-old Sammy could hardly keep his eyes open. His dad carried him up to bed, sang him snatches of their favorite lullaby, and tucked him in. Ten-year-old Emma came upstairs on her own. Her dad happily agreed to read a chapter in a book with her before she went to sleep.

The next morning Emma woke up, got dressed, and went downstairs for breakfast. She was startled to see a friend of her mother's sitting at the kitchen table. "What are you doing here?" asked Emma. "Better ask your mom," the friend replied. Laura took a deep breath. She sat with Emma, put an arm around her, and said, "Daddy died last night." "You mean your daddy," said Emma urgently. "No, I mean our daddy." Laura's voice broke.

Emma asked, "How could that happen?" Laura said, "His heart stopped beating and he died. It's called a heart attack." "Why didn't anybody save him?" Emma cried.

Laura decided not to tell Emma every detail of the rescue attempts by the EMTs, the nightmarish trip in the ambulance to the hospital, the final giving up of hope. She knew that Emma was trying

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to get her mind around something that seemed incomprehensible to Laura, too. She tried to stick to the essentials.

“I called 911 when Daddy said he was having pain in his chest. His chest hurt because his heart wasn’t beating right. The paramedics took him in the ambulance to the hospital, but they couldn’t keep his heart beating and the doctors couldn’t, either. If your heart doesn’t beat, your body can’t keep on living.” Laura and Emma began sobbing together and hugged each other. That was all Emma wanted to know right then. Soon she announced that she was hungry and really needed her breakfast.

In the very beginning...

You will need to tell your child or children about the death using words and concepts tailored to each individual child.

- It is important that you—or another trusted adult who knows the child well—be the one to tell him or her what has happened, rather than having the child learn from picking up bits and snatches of adult conversation or hear from an unreliable source or sense your tension and not know why. You want your child to get accurate information, to feel that he or she can ask questions, and that you can be trusted to tell the truth.
- For all children, it is important to use the word *died* rather than a euphemism like “went to sleep,” “passed on,” or “left us” because these can be misunderstood and lead to both confusion and anxiety.
- Give your child the basic information, then follow his or her lead. Many children don’t want to or are unable to digest too much information all at once. Answer questions as they

come along. Know that you may have to answer some questions more than once and that the questions may not make sense to you but do have meaning to a child.

For very young children...

Laura could hear Sammy stirring upstairs. She ran up so that she could catch him alone in his room, as the house was gradually filling up with people. When she told him that his father had died, Sammy put his fingers in his ears and turned his face to the wall. He shrugged Laura off when she tried to hug him. Finally, she went downstairs. Later, Sammy appeared in the kitchen, marched up to her friend and demanded to see Daddy. Laura's friend said that he had died. Sammy asked, "Well, when is he coming back?" Laura joined the conversation and told Sammy that Daddy's heart had stopped beating and that meant he couldn't breathe, or move, or feel any more. Sammy went to play but soon came back, saying that when Daddy came home from work, he needed to help Sammy with his Legos. Laura gently said that Daddy wouldn't be coming home again, but she would help. Sammy shouted that she was no good at Legos and he'd wait for Daddy. Later that evening, after she had once again told Sammy that Daddy was dead and wasn't going to come walking in the door, she heard him asking her sister and her friends the same questions he had asked Laura: "Can Daddy go peepee? Can Daddy ride his bike? When will Daddy sing to me again?"

- Little children need to be told in very simple terms that death means that the person's body is no longer alive: their loved one can no longer breathe, move, or talk. The person who died can no longer feel pain or be sad. And the child won't see that person any more.

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- Most very young children will not be able to grasp the idea of *being* and *not being*. They do not have the concept of irreversibility.
- Be ready for many concrete questions. You can be very specific that the deceased cannot eat any more, go to the bathroom any more, etc. And don't be surprised when the little child to whom just yesterday you carefully explained that Grandpa has died asks, "When is Grandpa coming to see us again?"
- Expect them to ask the same questions many times, not because they haven't been listening or are trying to push your buttons, but because their brains are not developed enough to "get it." Answering their repeated questions again and again in the same way, instead of trying to explain differently, actually aids their understanding.
- If it fits with your family's belief system, you can illustrate the idea that the body dies but the soul or spirit lives on by putting your hand into a glove. Wiggle your fingers. This is like a person who is alive. Take your hand out and distance it from the glove. The glove no longer moves; it is like a dead body. But the hand is still moving in another place, just as the soul or spirit is still there. It just isn't in the body anymore, just as the hand isn't in the glove anymore.

For children between about 5 and 8...

- Somewhere between ages 5 and 8, most children will be able to conceptualize and understand death as the end of biological functioning—life. You talk in the simple, concrete terms mentioned above, but they start to "get it" in a way their younger siblings cannot (or they could not when they were younger).

STEP 1: LET GRIEF HAPPEN

- Be ready to answer questions. Get as much information as you need to tell your child what actually happened in this particular death and why it happened at this particular time. Then give the child as much information as he or she asks for, but no more than is requested.
 - ▶ For example: “Her heart wasn’t working right. It stopped beating. The doctors couldn’t get it started again. People can’t live if their hearts don’t beat.”
 - ▶ Or: “He was driving really fast and couldn’t stop the car when the truck in front of him stopped. His car crashed into the truck.” Child: “Why did he die?” Your answer: “His chest was crushed and he couldn’t breathe any more. And then he died.”

Laura was able to talk to Sammy quietly one night at bedtime and tell him that Daddy’s body was dead but his spirit lived on. It was like the wind. Sammy couldn’t see it or touch it, but he could feel it and know that it was there. Sammy came to love putting his face to the open window to feel the breeze because it reminded him of Daddy.

- Most children of this age are now able to get the idea (as Sammy did) that the spirit or soul lives on but is like the wind, something you can’t see or touch, but that you can feel and know is present. If this fits with your family’s belief system, it can be a comforting concept for a child.
- Children of this age can understand the idea that the person they loved lives on in their memories. The memories they have of their loved one are theirs to keep, like a gift they

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have received which belongs to them. This idea can be embraced by families of any belief system.

For children of about 7 or 8 and older (including adolescents)...

Over the course of the next few days, Emma asked more questions about heart attacks and what happened. Laura dealt with one question at a time, answering as best she knew. It was painful, but Laura was glad Emma felt able to come to her with her concerns. Emma also wanted to know who would coach her soccer team now that Daddy couldn't and whether they were going to have to move. Laura said the assistant coach would take over and they would definitely stay in the same house until the end of the school year; she'd let Emma know what they'd do after that when there was time to figure it out.

- From about age 7 to 8 and older, children and adolescents will have concerns about their own lives and futures and how the death will affect them. The conversations may be less about the way the body stops working and more about how this loss will affect their lives. These issues are discussed in the sections that follow.

- Children of this age, especially adolescents, may have questions about how or why death occurs. They may want to talk about meaning.
 - ▶ You don't have to have all the answers. Your job is to be a sounding board for them to figure out answers that have meaning for them at this stage of their lives—or to connect them with other adults, such as a clergy person, a caring adult friend or relative, or a counselor who has the time and

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interest to grapple with the big questions about the meaning of life and death.

Laura was exhausted. The visit by the minister to discuss the funeral service had been comforting and wrenching at the same time. It took what felt like her last ounce of strength to go to the funeral home with her sister and her husband's sister to choose a casket, figure out an announcement and make plans for the funeral. When she got home, she collapsed in a chair, only to be pounced on by Sammy wanting her to fix a broken toy, then saying he wanted Daddy to do it. She told her sister that it would just be too much to take Sammy to the funeral. He could never sit quietly for that long. Besides, he was so little. He wouldn't understand what was going on anyway. Her sister told her that it would be really important to take Sammy. He needed a concrete way to say "Good-bye" to his Daddy to help it seem real and give him some sense of finality. She offered to be "assigned" to Sammy the day of the funeral, ready to answer his questions and tend to his needs so that Laura could focus on her own grieving. Laura gratefully accepted.

It is important for most children to go to the funeral or memorial service of their loved one.

- This helps the grieving process by making the death real, marking its finality, and providing a before and after reference point. The funeral or memorial service provides a meaningful ritual to express feelings, linking the bereaved family to the community, and bringing in religious faith, if it fits your family's beliefs. These rituals are ways in which you and your children can say good-bye to the person who died.
- Children who are shielded from this important symbolic and community event often feel less grounded and even cheated,

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robbed of an important way of working through the death and saying good-bye. The good intentions of those who feel they are protecting the children end up backfiring.

The next day, Laura sat down with both children and told them what to expect the day of the funeral. She told them that Daddy's body would be in a casket, described the mourner's room and who they would see there, said that Daddy's favorite hymn would be sung, and that people would say things about Daddy. She told them that some of the people would cry and that was OK. Others wouldn't, and that was OK, too. She said there might be times when it seemed like a big party of people getting together to tell nice things about Daddy and it was OK to smile and laugh as they remembered him.

- Prepare each child for what to expect at the planned ceremonies and events as they apply: the wake or viewing, if there is one; the funeral or memorial service; the funeral procession and burial, if those will happen; any reception or luncheon, sitting shiva for Jewish families.

Emma announced that they needed to have yellow roses at the funeral because they were Daddy's favorite, and Laura immediately agreed. Emma also had many questions about what Daddy would wear. Laura let her choose the tie, a task that Emma took very seriously. Laura watched as Emma laid out all the possibilities, picked one, then changed her mind and picked another. Emma also wanted to put a Sudoku book that Daddy had been working on in the casket. Laura explained that this could go in as a way for Emma to show how well she knew Daddy and what he liked; of course, Daddy couldn't do Sudoku anymore now that he was dead. Emma asked if she could make some drawings to go in the casket. Laura encouraged her to do so, as an expression of her love for Daddy. Sammy chose to put

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in a Lego construction he'd made, then insisted he wanted to give his favorite teddy bear to Daddy.

- Plan for each child's participation in the funeral or memorial service.
 - ▶ If you have a very young child (or an older child with a short attention span), ask another adult to come with you to the funeral and take primary responsibility for that child. This person can give the child whatever attention he or she needs, answering questions as necessary. (Or, if the child becomes too restless to stay through the whole service, the designated adult can quietly take the child out.) You should be able to focus your attention on the funeral and your own needs at that time.
 - ▶ Children can place a letter, drawing or toy in the casket prior to the funeral to express their love for the person who died. If that's not in keeping with your religious tradition or you simply don't feel comfortable with putting anything into the casket, you can have a special place at home where the child places these tokens. When there has been cremation, drawings or letters can be buried with or kept near the urn, or they can be scattered with the ashes.
 - ▶ Older children may be able to have some voice in planning the funeral, memorial service, wake, or reception. This can range from suggesting the loved one's favorite hymn or psalm, to helping choose photos to be displayed at the funeral home, to telling what kind of cookies must be on the table later at a reception or at shiva.

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- ▶ Adolescents may wish to speak at the service or to write words that someone else will deliver, but they should not be pressured to do so.
- Often, it is helpful to arrange for a private viewing at the funeral home for the children.

Laura made special arrangements with the funeral home for her and the children to view the body privately and put the treasures in the casket before the funeral. She asked her sister to come with her for support. When they got there, Sammy pulled at her hand to go see Daddy, but Emma hung back, saying she wanted to remember Daddy the way he'd been when he was alive. Laura didn't pressure Emma, letting her stay outside with her aunt while Laura and Sammy saw the body. Sammy marched right up and put his fingers under Daddy's nose. Finally, he pronounced that Daddy wasn't breathing anymore. Laura realized how important it was for him to find this out for himself rather than just hear it from grown-ups. As they put the pictures, the Sudoku, the Legos and the teddy bear into the casket, Laura said to Sammy that Daddy had loved Sammy very much and knew that Sammy loved him very much. But Daddy wouldn't have wanted Sammy to bury anything with his body that Sammy really needed himself. Sammy could remember Daddy each time he hugged the teddy bear. With that reassurance, Sammy was able to take the teddy bear back into his own arms.

- Some children, particularly younger ones, may wish to touch the body to know that the person is no longer breathing and able to move. This isn't disrespectful. It's just a way of making the abstract idea of death real to them.

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- If your child says that he or she doesn't want to go to the funeral, take some time to see what this is about before deciding what to do.

When Laura and Sammy came out after viewing Daddy's body, Emma suddenly said she didn't want to go to the funeral after all. Laura's first impulse was to tell her she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to do. But Laura worried that Emma would always regret not being there for the ceremony. So she took Emma to a quiet spot and asked her why she didn't want to go. After awhile, Emma was able to say that she was afraid she'd have to look in the casket. Laura reassured her that the casket would be closed during the funeral. She could participate in the service by listening to what people said about Daddy, saying the prayers, looking at the beautiful flowers, and singing the hymn. Relieved, Emma joined the family.

- ▶ Sometimes children are anxious about something that you can help them understand better or can change to make them more comfortable. If they have fears that you can reassure them about, they may be able to attend.
- ▶ Sometimes children pick up on your worry about their ability to last through the service and say they don't want to go. This is the time to reassure them (and you) that there will be someone there specifically to be with them and help them with what they need.
- ▶ Some children still are absolutely adamant that they don't want to go to the funeral or wake, no matter how well you listen to their concerns and reassure

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them. Then it is time to make alternative arrangements for them to stay home without anyone feeling ashamed about that choice. It defeats the purpose of the “Good-bye” if the child is dragged kicking and screaming to the funeral.

- If for some reason your child is not able to go to a funeral or memorial service for the person who died, plan a private ceremony of some kind at a later time during which the child can say a ritualized good-bye.

- ▶ This could involve suggesting the child to write or draw something, then lighting a candle and dedicating it to the loved one who died,
- ▶ Or burying the child’s letter or picture in a special spot, perhaps under a new planting,
- ▶ Or creating some other ritual that suits your family and in which the child can participate.

Children need to be able to tell their story.

- At first, the most important thing is for each of your children to forge an age-appropriate narrative or story about their special person’s death. This narrative will probably include:
 - ▶ Some explanation of the illness (if applicable)
 - ▶ The child’s understanding of the death itself

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- ▶ The child's perceptions of what happened after the death (probably including the funeral and the people who comforted them)
- ▶ How the child felt at various points (and feels now).

On a Monday evening during a local bereavement program, the children in a group for 4-year-olds were each sharing the story of what happened to the important person in his or her life who died. After several children told about the car accident or illness that caused the death of their important person—Mom or Dad or brother or sister—it was Jack's turn. Jack said simply, "A spider bit Baby Josh and he died."

The group facilitators knew that Jack's brother had died from SIDS – Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. So they told Jack's mother, Lisa, what he had shared and suggested that she make sure Jack understood what had happened to his little brother.

Lisa talked with Jack and he listened very attentively to her explanation. "Baby Josh," she said, "didn't wake up one morning and when I went to check on him, he wasn't breathing. His body had stopped working and he had died. That is why we don't have him here with us anymore and why we can't see him." She asked Jack if he understood.

Jack sighed and looked at his mother. "Was Baby Josh sick?" he asked. "No," said Lisa. "Did he get hurt?" asked Jack. Lisa assured Jack that Joshua had not been sick or hurt – he had just died. Jack became increasingly anxious during the conversation, lying across the kitchen chair, rocking on his tummy, his gaze focused on the kitchen floor. Josh looked up at Lisa, with wet eyes. "That," he said to his mom, "isn't a story."

For Jack, the idea that his baby brother could be here one day and gone the next without anything apparently happening was

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incomprehensible on even the most basic level. It was not what he (and all bereaved children) needed – a cohesive, understandable, age-appropriate way of describing what happened to the important person who died. It was also very frightening to think that anyone could just drop dead at any time. After talking with the facilitators at their bereavement program, Lisa went back to Jack and began a new discussion of what had happened to Baby Joshua, telling him the story he'd needed all along.

She explained that Joshua had gotten very sick, very fast during the night. Before Mom found out that he was very sick, Joshua had stopped breathing, his body stopped working, and he died. That sickness, she explained, was called SIDS. Jack listened carefully and asked if he could get sick like that. Lisa explained that only little babies get that kind of sickness and most babies don't get that sickness at all.

From then on, Jack could tell his story about his brother Joshua and about SIDS – the “sickness that only little babies get”—that Joshua got and died from. The spider, no longer necessary, disappeared from Jack's story entirely.

- Parents and caregivers can help their children tell their stories in whatever way suits each child best. It's also OK if another trusted adult talks, writes, plays or draws with the child.
 - ▶ Even though you gave an initial explanation to your child right after the death and answered immediate questions, your child's need to create his or her own narrative continues.
 - ▶ Encourage your child to use his or her own words. When you talk with your child and continue to answer questions, be sure to use words the child can understand.

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- ▶ It often helps to have the child's story written down. For young children, this will be a collaborative effort with an adult. Older children and adolescents may want to do this on their own. Very little children may need to play out their stories using dolls or other toys.
- ▶ Your children may want or need to draw pictures. Some children will want to illustrate the stories. Some will want to draw pictures to show their feelings. Some will want the whole story to be done in pictures.
- ▶ This narrative will need to be re-worked at different developmental stages. What worked for the child when he or she was 4 will no longer be sufficient when he or she is 9, and that story, in turn, is likely to be inadequate for a 15-year-old.
 - This may or may not be a physical re-writing of a written story.
 - It may just be a re-thinking using new conceptual tools and a new capacity to make use of information.
- ▶ If you have more than one child, each one will have a different story and a different way of expressing it.
- Sometime after this narrative about the loved one's death has been established, your child will want and need to have a story about his or her special person's life.
 - ▶ The time for this life story may come within days of getting the narrative of the death straight or it may come weeks or months later. The story of the loved

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one's life will certainly be one to be revisited and added to over time. (We'll talk about positive memories again in a later section.)

► For now, it's enough to know that this story will include:

– Memories of the special person and what they did together when that person was alive

– Perhaps the child's continuing relationship to the person who died (as a role model or as the one who showed him/her how to play a game, for example).

► Just as with the narrative about the important person's death, you can help each child find his or her own best way of telling about and recording the memories of that person's life: writing, drawing, telling you the story while you write it down, playing it out are a few possibilities. Remember that each child has his or her own timetable for this and his or her own favorite modes of expression.

As you go on after the first days...

Laura put a sandwich on Sammy's plate.

"This is peanut butter and strawberry jam. You made it wrong! I hate strawberry!" Sammy shouted.

"You liked strawberry jam yesterday."

"I don't like strawberry now. I won't eat it."

Laura sighed and made Sammy a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich.

“This is yucky. You never give me what I want.”

“What’s wrong with it? It’s peanut butter and grape.” Laura felt exasperated and hurt. She was trying so hard. Why was Sammy rejecting her best efforts?

“You cut it into four pieces. I want it in two pieces. You never do anything right! Nothing is right!” Sammy howled.

Laura started to angrily snatch up the plate, ready to tell Sammy that his lunch was over, when she caught herself up short. Instead, she crouched by Sammy’s chair and gave him a hug. “I know, Sammy. Nothing seems quite right now because Daddy is dead and can’t be with us. We all wish that he could be here making sandwiches with us. I can’t make that happen. But I will always love you and I will take care of you. Even if I’m not as good at peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as he was.”

Children’s grief can take many forms.

- Anger, irritability, and frustration are common, often in fairly frequent short bursts.

- ▶ Your child feels a need to make things as they used to be and is frustrated and irritable when they can’t be.

- Identifying what things can stay the same (“Friday night can still be pizza night; the family still goes to church”), and what things have changed (“Daddy can’t drive us to church anymore and sit next to us in the pew”) can be clarifying and reassuring.

- Honest recognition that the world your family has known really has changed and that this is hard for all of you can help to define this as shared pain—you’re in this together.

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- ▶ For younger children particularly, the anger or irritability may be directed toward you, the surviving parent. The child feels it is the parent's job to make the world seem right and it just doesn't.

- ▶ Often, the child focuses on little things that aren't right. If you, the parent, get hung up on those little things (which aren't really the issue), it can lead to frustration all around because there will always be another thing at another time.
 - Recognize this for what it is: making a vague sense of the world not being right into something concrete.

 - If you take this personally, it can feel very hurtful. But if you can say to yourself that your child is signaling you how wrong the world feels right now, you can see that it's not really about you.

 - Then you can focus on giving your child a hug, empathizing with his or her sense of dislocation, and reassuring your child that you all will get through this

- ▶ Older children may be angry with God, the doctors, or the person who died. Let them know you understand their sense that something happened which made the world feel wrong, focusing on the feeling without buying into the blaming.

- Some children are sad.

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- Some children are morose, down on themselves.
- Some see themselves as victims.
- Some children feel no hope.
- Some children may feel guilty because they think that something they did caused the death. Those children will need repeated reassurance that this is not so.
- Some may feel guilty because they may have been mad at the person who died.
- Some no longer trust the world to be a safe or fair place. This can spill out in their attitude toward you, authorities, institutions or religion.
- Children may show their grief and stress by being exhausted, lethargic, hyperactive, or having problems with focus, attention, concentration, and memory. Understand that these are symptoms of grief/stress just as much as tears are.
- In general, young children are more concrete in their worries, needs, and understanding, whereas adolescents often need to grapple with the bigger issues of life and death.

If you have more than one child, expect them each to respond differently to this death. They are of different ages, different temperaments, and have had different life experiences. They have had different relationships with the person who died, so they will be mourning different losses.

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The waves of grief—in whatever form—are different for children.

- Adults often experience crashing waves of grief that almost sweep them off their feet and may last a long time, or powerful rage that stays with them. Children, however, usually experience feeling states that are more like choppy water, with smaller, shorter bursts of emotion. They are often able to play and have fun in between periods of sadness, anger, or irritability. This doesn't mean they aren't grieving.
- While grief affects children at many different times of the day, it often shows up very strongly at bedtime. Although it slows down the getting-to-sleep process, it is often worth giving the bit of extra time and attention that are required to respond to your child and to comfort him or her.
 - ▶ It can feel hard to do because you are tired and want to be wrapping up the day, but your availability when your child is most needy and receptive makes a big difference.
 - ▶ Build this extra time into your bedtime routine if you find that it is needed. If you start the process of getting ready for bed earlier, it won't end up keeping both your child and you up too late.

Your grief also needs to happen, and in ways that do not overwhelm the children.

- Your children are likely to notice that you are sad, as well as more spacey and/or irritable than usual. Agree with them. It's true. Label it as grief so that it is understandable. You all are grieving and you all show it at times. Part of loving

together is grieving together. But try not to completely fall apart frequently in front of the children.

- ▶ Getting teary or crying now and then in front of them and with them is OK and perfectly normal.
- ▶ Uncontrolled sobbing, ranting, or getting hysterical is best done out of your children's view and perhaps with another adult for support. It can be very frightening for children to see.
- ▶ Even if you don't feel strong at the moment, you can reassure the children that you and they will get through this, and in so doing find some reserves of strength in yourselves.

Three key messages you give to your children are:

- "I am sad but OK."
- "It won't always be this sad."
- "I can still take care of you."

Your children need you to be the parent. They should not feel responsible for taking care of your grief, even though you are really hurting.

- Some children feel they now have to be the caretaker or take on the role of the parent who died, becoming pseudo-mature or the "good child."

10 STEPS FOR PARENTING YOUR GRIEVING CHILDREN

- Sometimes it feels easy or even good to let that happen, but taking on too mature a role too soon actually gets in the way of the kind of growth that leaves a child feeling strong and solid.
- Your task may be complicated by well-meaning relatives who tell your child “You’re the man of the house now” or “Since Daddy has you for a daughter, he still has a little woman to take care of him.” You can tell them kindly but firmly that you think your child is wonderful and responsible, but you aren’t expecting him or her to take on an adult role.

Mornings were rough for Laura. She found herself almost overwhelmed by grief and loneliness as she bustled around, helping the children get ready for school. She thought she would burst with the pressure of the tears welling up in her eyes.

On one of the early days, Laura had completely broken down sobbing over breakfast. Emma raced to get her tissues and tea, while Sammy put his head in her lap and said, “Don’t cry, Mommy.” When she continued to sob, Sammy sounded frightened and his pleas for her to stop crying became ever more urgent. Emma started to seem older than her years, trying to clean up the kitchen and pack Sammy’s backpack. Laura was deeply touched, but she knew this wasn’t something that should be a daily occurrence—a feeling that was reinforced when she got a concerned email from Emma’s teacher that afternoon saying Emma seemed withdrawn and preoccupied.

So Laura made arrangements with her friend Joan. If she thought she was going to “lose it,” she’d call Joan and they would arrange for an emergency hug. They would meet in one of their driveways for 10 minutes after they’d gotten the children off to school. Laura would

STEP 1: LET GRIEF HAPPEN

spend the whole time sobbing and Joan would simply hold her. Then they would both go on with their days. But knowing she could call Joan and be held was enough to help Laura hang on through the morning. And Laura made plans for regular visits with her sister just to talk, as well.

At the same time, find other avenues for pouring out your own grief.

- Talk about your grief, pain, and confusion with close friends or family members who are receptive, to a grief counselor or therapist, or to a clergy person.
- Having several different people that you can talk to and cry with gives you the support you deserve and helps you to stay in your parenting role with your children.
- If you don't have family and friends who can support you, seek out a support group at your local hospice or bereavement center, try an online group such as www.opentohope.org or www.griefnet.org, and/or start by keeping a journal.

Prioritize how to spend your energy during the early stages of your own mourning, putting the children at the top of your list. Figure out how you can give each child some real attention each day while also taking care of yourself.