

Caring for a Surviving Child

1. The child's first concern may be "Who is going to take care of me now?"

- A) Maintain usual routines as much as possible.
- B) Show affection, and assure the child that those who love him or her still do and that they will take care of him or her.

2. The child will probably have many questions and may need to ask them again and again.

- A) Encourage the child to ask questions and give honest, simple answers that can be understood. Repeated questions require patience and continued expression of caring.
- B) Answers should be based on the needs of the child seems to be expressing, not necessarily on the exact words used.

3. The child will not know appropriate behavior for the situation.

- A) Encourage the child to talk about their feelings and share with them how you feel. You are a model for how one expresses feelings. It is helpful to cry. It is not helpful to be told how one should or should not feel.
- B) Allow the child to express their caring for you. Loving is giving "and" taking.

4. The child may fear that they also may die or that they somehow caused the death.

- A) Reassure the child about the cause of the death and explain that any thoughts they may have had about the person who died did "not" cause the death.
- B) Reassure him or her that this does "not" mean someone else he or she loves is likely to die soon.

5. The child may wish to be a part of the family rituals.

- A) Explain these to them and include them in deciding how they will participate. Remember that they should be prepared beforehand, told what to expect, and have a supporting adult with them. Do not force them to do anything they don't feel comfortable doing.

6. The child may show regressive behavior.

- A) A common reaction to stress is reverting to an earlier stage of development. (For example, child may begin thumb sucking, or bed-wetting; or, may need to go back into diapers or have a bottle for a time). Support the child in this and keep in mind that these regressions are temporary.

Adults can help prepare a child deal with future losses of those who are significant by helping the child handle smaller losses through sharing their feelings when a pet dies or when death is discussed in a story or on television.

In helping children understand and cope with death, remember four key concepts: Be Loving, Be Accepting, Be Truthful and Be Consistent.

EXPLANATIONS THAT MAY NOT HELP

Outlined below are explanations that adults may give to a child to explain why the person they loved has died. Unfortunately, simple, but dishonest answers can only serve to increase the fear and uncertainty that the child is feeling. Children tend to be very literal - - if an adult says that "Grandpa/Grandma died because they were old and tired" the child may wonder when they too will be too old and they certainly get tired - - what is tired enough to die?

1. "Grandpa/Grandma will sleep in peace forever." This explanation may result in child's fear of going to bed or to sleep.
2. "It is God's will". The child will not understand a God who takes a loved one because He needs that person Himself, or "God took him because he was so good." The child may decide to be bad so God won't take him too.
3. "Daddy/Mommy went on a long trip and won't be back for a long time." The child may wonder why the person left without saying goodbye. Eventually they will realize Daddy/Mommy isn't coming back and feel that something they did caused Daddy/Mommy to leave.
4. "John was sick and went to the hospital where he died." The child will need an explanation about "Little" and "Big" sicknesses. Otherwise, they may be extremely fearful if they or someone they love has to go to the hospital in the future.