

# HELPING YOUR CHILD DEAL WITH DEATH

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/ID PROGRAM  
MARCH 2017 RESOURCE SHARING

Sadly, recent tragic events in our area have reminded us that children need help to cope with death. When a loved one dies, children feel and show their grief in different ways. How children cope with the loss depends on things like their age, how close they felt to the person who died, and the support they receive.

Here are some things parents can do to help a child who has lost a loved one:

**When talking about death, use simple, clear words.** To break the news that someone has died, approach your child in a caring way. Use words that are simple and direct such as “I have some sad news to tell you. Grandma died today.” Pause to give your child time to take in your words.

**Listen and comfort.** Every child reacts differently to learning that a loved one has died. Some cry. Some ask questions. Others seem not to react at all. That’s okay. Stay with your child to offer hugs or reassurance or answer questions.

**Put emotions into words.** Encourage children to say what they’re thinking and feeling in the days, weeks, and months following the loss. Talking about your own feelings helps children be aware of and feel comfortable with theirs.

**Tell your child what to expect.** If the death of a loved one means changes in your child’s life, head off any worries by explaining what those changes will mean. For example, “Aunt Sarah will pick you up from school like Grandma used to.”

**Talk about funerals and rituals.** Allow children to join in rituals like viewings, funerals or memorial services. Tell your child ahead of time what will happen. You might need to explain burial or cremation. Share your family’s beliefs about what happens to a person’s soul or spirit after death. Explain what happens after the service as a way to show that people will feel better.

**Give your child a role.** Having a small, active role can help children master an unfamiliar and emotional situation such as a funeral or memorial service. Your child may read a poem, pick a song to be played or gather some photos to display. Let them decide if and how they take part.

**Help your child remember the person.** In the days and weeks ahead, encourage your child to draw pictures or write down favorite stories of their loved one. Don’t avoid mentioning the person who died.

**Respond to emotions with comfort and reassurance.** Notice if your child seems sad, worried, or upset in other ways. Ask about their feeling and listen. Let your child know it takes time to feel better after a loved one dies. Support groups and counseling can help children who need more support.

**Help your child feel better.** Provide the comfort your child needs, but don’t dwell on sad feelings. After a few minutes of talking and listening, shift to an activity or topic that helps your child feel a little better.

**Give your child time to heal from the loss.** Grief is a process that happens over time. Be sure to have ongoing conversations to see how your child is feeling and doing. Healing doesn’t mean forgetting about the loved one. It means remembering the person with love and letting loving memories stir good feelings that support us as we go on to enjoy life.