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## Family Focus

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Some of the same guidelines mentioned in the last column about helping a young child cope with the death of a loved one apply to an older child as well. You will want your child to hear the sad news of a loved one's death from you, if possible. Pick a familiar setting to let your child know, such as home, and keep your message simple and direct.

### What to Do:

In general, a child over the age of 6 will have some understanding about the permanence of death. He or she will need comfort, reassurance and encouragement to ask questions and to express his or her feelings. Stay close physically as well, since your presence and physical touch can be very soothing.

Try to answer questions honestly and simply. Sometimes a question contains a hidden meaning. You will want to verify its intent when responding, so that your child's needs will be truly satisfied. For example, when Avery wants to know what will happen to her dog when he dies, she may actually be seeking information about herself and the people in her life. After answering her question about her dog, a helpful follow up might be, "Is there anything else you want to know?" or "It's understandable that you're wondering about this."

Let your child know what to expect. If the death of a loved one means changes in your child's life, head off any worries or fears by explaining what will happen. For example, "Aunt Sara will pick you up from school like Grandma used to." Or, "I need to stay with Grandpa for a few days. That means you and Dad will be home taking care of each other. But I'll talk to you every day, and I'll be back on Sunday."

Respect your child's possible reluctance to talk much about his or her loved one's death. Each child may have a different way of responding to loss. It is important for you, however, to continue to mention the person and reminisce about happy times or what you miss. Let your child see how you are coping by talking with your friends, seeking spiritual comfort, and crying and expressing sadness. As long as your emotions aren't too strong and alarming to your child, you will be providing a good example that it is natural to express sad feelings. You can say that it helps you to talk about the person who has died and to be sad. You want to clear the way for your child to talk or ask questions without worrying that you will become too upset.

Older children may turn to their peers for support and tell you they don't want to talk about the death. Avoid forcing the issue, and instead encourage your child to reach out to other adults whom they trust, such as a teacher or school counselor. Try to maintain an emotional connection with your child, as well as physical (hugs, back rubs, etc.). He or she needs your support even if it's sometimes difficult to acknowledge it.

Encourage your child to attend the funeral or memorial service, and think of a way he or she can participate in order to feel included. But after you have explained details of what will take place, if your child is strongly fearful and reluctant to attend, try to honor these wishes. The graveside part of a funeral can be especially difficult for children. Remember, there is no right and wrong. Your child will most likely follow your lead, so if you are accepting and reassuring about the decision, then he or she will probably be at peace with it too.

### Guilt

Children can feel guilty after someone close has died. Younger children often have magical thinking; they believe their own thoughts and behavior cause things to happen. If Brett was angry at his little sister at times and she died, then he must have caused her death.

Older children's guilt takes the form of wondering what they could have done differently, so their loved one wouldn't have died. Maybe their father wouldn't have had a car accident or a heart attack or cancer if they had only behaved better and hadn't caused him stress. Also, children may feel guilt about being argumentative or mean to their father, or about ever wishing that he were dead or that they had a different father.

Children need continuous reassurance over time that they had nothing to do with a loved one's death. And they need to know that it is natural and normal to have been angry and upset with the person at times and to have occasionally harbored negative feelings.

#### Anger

Children may feel anger when a loved one dies. It can be directed at the person who died and abandoned them, or more often it is diffused and directed at anyone and everyone for all sorts of unpredictable reasons.

Provide outlets for your child to express his or her anger. Physical activities such as sports, dancing, yard work and gymnastics, and creative activities, such as writing or art are helpful. Encourage your child to talk with someone he or she trusts.

Older children are at risk for engaging in potentially destructive behavior. They may turn to drugs or alcohol to escape from reality, or lose interest in school or previously enjoyable activities. They may become sexually promiscuous and have frequent conflicts with family and friends.

Notify teachers, coaches, the school counselor, and any other adults who are significant in your child's life. Ask them to let you know about any signs that your child may be struggling. And if your child needs more help, find a therapist for additional support.

You are instrumental in helping your child through the grief process, so it is essential that you take care of yourself during this time as well. As I've mentioned before, just as airlines tell you to first put on your own oxygen mask before you help your child, you need to allow yourself time, support, and self-care for your own grieving. This is the time to lean on others for help with tasks, childcare, and emotional support for yourself. It's often hard to have to ask for help from others, but it's also an important time to do so, for your own sake and for your family's.

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