

## *Family Tapestries* Strengthening Family Bonds



### Fact Sheet

# The Impact of Parental Death on Children

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Death is a hard fact of life for adults to come to terms with, but it is especially difficult for children who have not yet grasped a full understanding of death. Few life stressors are more powerful than the death of a parent. Unfortunately, five to six percent of children will experience the death of a parent by the time he or she is sixteen years old.

The losses sustained through the death of a parent are numerous. Among these are the loss of support and a vacancy in the roles that the deceased parent used to fill. Death, though unavoidable is never easy to deal with and children may have the hardest time coming to terms with their parent's death.

## Children's Reaction to Loss and Grief

Philip Rice (1996) proposes three stages that survivors go through when coping with the death of a loved one.

1. **Shock.** Children are shocked with grief and doubt, and have a hard time dealing with the fact that their parent has died.
2. **Great Disturbance.** During this stage, children may show signs of physical and emotional disturbances. This may include inability to sleep, stomach upset, loss of appetite, depression, and anxiety.
3. **Gradual Reawakening.** Children gradually readjust their lives and learn to live and enjoy most aspects of life without the deceased parent.

It is important that parents and caregivers understand that the way children grieve is quite different from the way that adults do. Children may initially be too shocked to show any type of emotion and this is at times misunderstood to mean that they are fine when they really are not. In fact, most children are unable to handle the intense emotions that accompany the death of a parent for long periods of time. This explains why their grief may appear suppressed or periodic. Children who have experienced

the loss of a parent typically experience intense grief and sadness, social withdrawal, attention seeking, declines in academic performance, rebellion, anger, guilt, and preoccupation with thoughts about mom or dad.

Hospice Net ([www.hospicenet.org](http://www.hospicenet.org)) provides some characteristics of how children may view death and their needs at different ages. Here are a few examples:

### Infants–2 Years Old

- Will sense a loss
- Will pick up on grief of a parent or caretaker
- May change eating, sleeping, toilet habits

### 2–6 Years Old

- No understanding of time or death
- Picks up on nonverbal communication
- Thinks dead people continue to do things (eat, drink, go to the bathroom)
- Magical thinking, you wish it, it happens (bring the dead back)

### 6–9 Years Old

- Personifies death: A person or monster takes the parent away
- Fails to accept that death will happen to them
- Fears that death is something contagious
- Develops an interest in the causes of death such as violence, old age, and sickness

### 9–12 Years Old

- May see death as punishment for poor behavior
- Needs reassurance that wishes do not kill
- Concerns about ritual, burying
- Worries about who will provide and care for them

### Teenagers

- View death as inevitable, universal, irreversible, and questions the meaning of life

- Sees self as invincible—it will not happen to me
- May feel guilt, anger, and even some responsibility for death that occurred
- Not sure how to handle own emotions

Most children are able to make a healthy adjustment with support from family members, teachers, and other support systems. There are several things that parents and other adults can do to help children effectively deal with the loss of a parent.

## Clearly Explain to the Child What Has Happened to the Parent

Be open about what has happened to the parent because children have the right to know what circumstances have separated them from their mother or father. Children who have survived the death of a parent often feel that the death was their fault, and may also feel that the parent has chosen not to come back because of something that they have done. Clarify the cause of death and help them to understand that the death is not their fault. Children may not understand the permanent nature of death because they have an immature concept of death. Try to avoid the “death is like sleep” or “they’re in a better place now” explanations. They often make the child fearful of sleep or encourage them to want to go to that “better place.” Instead, explain to them that when a person dies, they do not come back and that we may miss them from time to time.

## Allow the Child to Talk About It

Because death and grief are uncomfortable subjects this opportunity is often denied and children’s recovery from loss may be more difficult and prolonged. Many adults are not comfortable with a sorrowful child and many deny the fact that children do grieve. It may be hard to answer questions about the death of a mate or spouse while still dealing with a sense of loss, but it is important to address the topic when children bring it up. Extended family members, teachers, and neighbors may be helpful in allowing children to talk about their feelings honestly and openly without offending a grieving parent. Lending children an ear helps them to express their feelings and validates their current emotions. Keeping it all inside will not help him or her to heal. Try to find brief answers that address their questions.

## Allow the Child to Take Part in the Funeral Services

Allowing children to attend and take part in funeral services provides an avenue for closure. Children may

never have attended a funeral service so explain the circumstances surrounding funeral rites that are common to the culture or community. Be sure to explain the wake, the funeral, and the burial ceremony beforehand.

## Inform the Child’s Social Support Systems of the Parental Death

The child’s teacher and the parents of his or her friends should know what has happened so that they will understand the marked changes in the child’s behavior and provide the support needed when a parent is unavailable.

## Provide Security

Provide a sense of security for children by maintaining daily routines and predictable patterns that they know they can trust. They also need to know that their basic needs will be met.

Grief is a personal emotion that is expressed by different people in different ways. The death of a parent creates considerable stress and tension that may take a while to go away. The most important support you can provide for your child includes providing emotional support, listening to one another, and crying together. Talk about your feelings with your children and remember to validate theirs.

## References and Resources

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