

# HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH DEATH

## **\*\*USEFUL GUIDELINES FOR TELLING A CHILD THAT SOMEONE HAS DIED**

1. Someone emotionally close to the child should be the one to “break the news.”
2. Choose a location where you will not be interrupted.
3. Stick to the known facts. If you don’t know everything, don’t make it up or evade the questions. Simply say that you don’t know.
4. Be concrete. Avoid vague or misleading terms like “He’s asleep”.
5. Avoid clichés like “All wounds heal in time” and “Everything will be all right.” Such statements don’t mean anything to children.
6. Simply be there with the child. Be OK with silence. The child may need time to react to the news.

## **\*\*COMMON SIGNS OF MOURNING IN CHILDREN**

Children have many of the same emotional and physical responses to losing a loved one as adults, however children mourn their loss in different ways. It is important you are aware of these so you can accurately meet their needs. When a child’s mourning behavior is wrongly perceived as misbehavior, the child’s hurt and confusion may deepen.

**Anxiety:** Children may be afraid of another death or loss and may therefore become clinging or demanding.

**Vivid memories:** Real or fantasized memories can invade their thoughts or even reveal themselves in dreams or nightmares.

**Sleep difficulty:** Losing sleep is very common. The child may have a hard time mourning the loss during the day and be more aware of it at night. They may also be plagued with vivid dreams or nightmares.

**Sadness and longing:** Some children cry and some don’t. Some may want to carry around an object that reminds them of the loved one. Some will focus on missing that person, some will try to hide it to protect others.

**Anger and acting out:** Children may become very angry at death, God, or adults in general. Or they may be angry at themselves, and somehow feel responsible for the death.

**Guilt:** Some children feel a sense of responsibility for the death. They may feel that if they were only a better child or if they hadn’t done this or that, the death would not have occurred. Children need to talk about these things in order to understand it is not true.

**School problems:** The child may experience issues in school due to difficulties in concentrating, memories, sadness, and grief.

**Physical complaints:** Common complaints include headaches, stomach aches, and may even include symptoms similar to those of the deceased.

### **\*\*HELPING CHILDREN ATTEND SERVICES**

1. Prepare the child for the experience by describing what the room will look like, where the body will be, how adults may act, etc. The more they know about what to expect, the better they can mentally adjust to this new experience.
2. If the child wishes, help him approach the casket. Viewing the body helps the child understand the reality of the death and can help bring closure. Few children later regret viewing the body; many regret not doing so. Plan the child's first viewing to be in private with a supportive adult.
3. If possible, involve them in some of the decisions for the funeral such as choosing the burial song.
4. Suggest specific ways the child can express their feelings during the services. Maybe they would like to place a flower on the casket or draw a picture and put it inside the casket. Be responsive and supportive of what the child wants to do. Do not force them to engage in any uncomfortable activities.
5. The support of a trusted adult is important. If the parent has lost a spouse or is mourning and will not be fully available for the child, someone else may need to be there for the child to talk, hold or take out of the room if necessary.
6. Encourage the child to talk, draw, or play to release emotions after the service. Patiently correct any misunderstandings about death or the service.