

Parent Tip Sheet: Helping Families Cope with Death

Prepared by the Families Forward Program of NYU Child Study Center

- It is important to provide children with honest and direct information about what has occurred. To the extent that your child wishes to discuss what happened, engage in open conversations about the cause of the death and encourage questions. When adults avoid discussion of death, this can convey that the topic is “taboo,” which may ultimately result in increasing children’s fears and worry.
- Allow your children to retain as much of their daily routines as possible during stressful times. By maintaining familiar schedules, children will gradually reestablish feelings of normalcy, and their anxieties about the loss will be significantly reduced.
- Encourage children to express and communicate their feelings. Memorial ceremonies and other rituals will be important for some children, while others may feel more comfortable expressing their emotions through art or through connecting with peers. Help your child to identify constructive methods to express feelings such as anger and sadness.
- It is important not to judge one child’s reactions to loss by another’s. Some children will find solace by spending time with friends and relatives; others will prefer to process the event in solitude. Reassure your child that it is normal to experience many different reactions to loss, including anger, guilt, and sadness- and that a person may feel sadness without necessarily crying.
- Every child will process this loss at their own pace. Be available to discuss the death on more than one occasion, as children’s interest in and questions about what happened will change over time.
- Mood changes are to be expected in children following a significant loss or upsetting events. As parents, be aware of and patient with these possible fluctuations in your child’s emotional world.
- Children’s ability to process loss will be influenced by their age and other factors. For age-appropriate resources to assist you and your child during the bereavement process, please access the manual titled “Caring for Kids After Trauma and Death: A Guide for Parents and Professionals,” at the NYU Child Study Center website:
http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/crisis_guide02.pdf.
- For additional information related to children and loss, please visit www.aboutourkids.org.