35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child

One of the most important things children have taught us is that everyone grieves differently. Below are a few suggestions that may help you help your child.

1. **Listen** (Don’t give advice or make judgments. Reflect back on what the child says using the child’s words.)
2. **Listen Some More** (Some kids are not verbal. Many times they will reveal their grief through their actions.)
3. **Be Honest. Never Lie to a Child** (It only complicates their grief if they are not told the truth.)
4. **Answer the Questions They Ask...Even the Hard Ones** (Kids ask out of curiosity because they don’t understand. If you don’t know the answer, it is acceptable to say “I don’t know.”)
5. **Give Them Choices** (Allow them to say goodbye the way they wish.)
6. **Encourage Consistency and Routines** (Life feels chaotic, unsafe, and unpredictable when a sudden death occurs.)
7. **Talk About and Remember the Person Who Died**
8. **Make A Child’s World Safe for Grieving** (Children need trusted support people in their lives to turn to after a death. In addition to parents, some may seek out a teacher, relative or family friend.)
9. **Expect and Allow all Kinds of Emotions...Shocked, Sad, Numb, Mad....** (Help a child feel safe by listening to and not putting down his or her feelings. Validating emotions will also help the child recognize that it’s acceptable to feel a wide variety of emotions.
10. **Forget About the “Grief Stages”**
    Denial/Anger/Bargaining/Depression/Acceptance (Grieving may include one, all or none of the so-called stages, and not in any particular order. Also, grief does not have a particular endpoint.)
11. **Respect Differences in Grieving Styles** (Recognizing that your child needs to grieve in his or her own way is essential.)
12. **Get out the Crayons, Pens, Pencils, Paint, and Chalk** (Not all children are talkers, and not all grief emotions are easily expressed verbally.)

13. **Run...Jump...Play – Or Find Other Ways to Release Energy and Emotions**
(Exercise and physical play do help children release energy and emotions.)

14. **Be a Model of Good Grief**
(Children watch adults to get cues about how they are “supposed” to grieve. Parents who attend to their own grief processes in positive ways set a good example for their children.)

15. **Hug with Permission**
(Children need lots of assurance after a death. Bear in mind, though, that some kids don't like to be hugged. If you are comforting a child, be sure to ask if it’s okay to hug him or her.)

16. **Practice Patience**

17. **Support Children Even When They are in a Bad Mood**
(In grief, bad moods can appear suddenly. Remember to validate the child’s feelings first, then encourage good choices. Children need to know that it’s normal and natural to feel the way they do.)

18. **Expect Some Kids to Act Younger Than Their Age**
(Kids feel anxious and insecure after a death. Acting younger than your age is not unusual. Don’t ridicule or punish the behavior, but allow it for a time. This is a coping mechanism for the child.)

19. **Expect Some Kids to Become Little Adults**
(You can help children or teens keep their childhood or youth by not allowing them to become miniature adults. Children or teens can become resentful and rebellious if they are forced to become a “mother” or “father” to younger siblings.)

20. **Encourage Kids to Eat Right and Drink Lots of Water**
(Changes in appetite are not uncommon after a death. Grieving is literally draining. Encourage healthy eating.)

21. **Help the Child at Bedtime....Sleeping May Come Hard for Some**
(Have consistent bedtime rituals, such as a story, a song, conversation or prayers. These times together will help reestablish a child’s sense of security.)

22. **Inform the Child’s Teacher about the Death**

23. **Resist Being Overprotective**
(It is natural for a parent to want to provide extra protection for their children. Try to remember that connecting with peers and engaging in pleasant activities can be powerful mood boosters for your child. Teens, in particular, find support from peers as well as their family.)

24. **Don’t Force Kids to Talk**
(Don’t be alarmed if a child does not want to talk about grief. And don’t assume that a child is not grieving because he or she chooses not to talk. The best approach is to invite and be open to a discussion, while still accepting the child’s choice.)
25. **Take a Break** (Children grieve in cycles. More than adults, they need times to take a break from grief. When possible, plan fun activities for your children.)

26. **Remember….**”**Playing**” is **“Grieving”** (Very young children don’t have the language skills or cognitive development to articulate in words the depths of their emotions. However, they will often use play to enact the struggle in their life.)

27. **Seek Additional Help for the Child, if Needed** (Mild depression, anxiety and behavioral problems are common in children after death.)

28. **Attend to the Physical Aspects of Death** (Grief hurts. Sometimes, children experience physical aches and pains, such as headaches, stomachaches, and other somatic symptoms. Validate their physical aches….don’t assume it is all in their head.)

29. **Help Children Know They are Not Alone in Their Grief**

30. **Grief Looks Different at Different Ages** (Young children have difficulty understanding the finality of death. School-age children may ask more detailed questions. Teens often turn to their peers for support. No matter how young children are when someone close dies, they are still impacted by the loss throughout their life.)

31. **Set Limits and Rules, and Enforce Them** (In the world of the grieving child, limits and rules are helpful because they help repair the sense of order and structure that was shattered by death. You may feel tempted to make exceptions, but remember it’s not helpful to change the rules because it only adds to the chaos and turbulence they are already experiencing.

32. **Remember Special Days that Impact the Child** (Some children may enjoy making a card or lighting a candle for the person who died. What’s important is allowing the child to remember the person who died in whatever way he or she chooses.)

33. **Plan Family Times Together**

34. **Be Available for Children When They Need You** (More than anything, your child needs the assurance that you will be there for him or her.)

35. **Take Care of Yourself, and Do Your Own Grieving** (If you are taking care of yourself, you will have more energy to give your children and will be less likely to vent your frustrations on them.)

-Excerpt from **35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child** *(The Dougy Center – National Center for Grieving Children & Families)*