

4 Ways

to support a grieving child

1. Let the child lead in conversation.

If she doesn't want to talk, that's okay. If she does want to talk, be an active listener. Rather than ask your own questions, simply reflect back to the child what you think you've heard her say. Ask, "Did I get that right?" Her words are more important than your own in those moments. If the child asks questions that are hard for you to answer, graciously receive the questions and acknowledge your limits. If you need help, a trusted grief counselor can facilitate conversation further.

2. Assume the child understands his own emotions.

As adults, we regularly operate under the assumption that we are older and wiser and know more about the world. But when it comes to feelings, each person is his or her own expert. If a child tells you he is happy, celebrate his happiness with him. Don't assume he's covering up deep sorrow. If he seems gloomy, let him describe his emotions to you without fear of judgment or interrogation. In either case, celebrate and commend the child for expressing how he feels. When grieving, children manifest their emotions differently than adults do. Expect that your grief experience will look different than theirs, and accept theirs at face value.

3. Beware of turning the child into a living icon of the lost loved one.

Adults can be particularly prone to this danger when the mutual loss is a family member. The child may have his mother's eyes, his grandpa's wit or his dad's shoulders, but he's still his own person. He may have received a quarter or half his DNA from his family member, but he's still uniquely himself. A child should never be used — overtly or inadvertently — as a living memorial to their lost loved one. Be careful not to search a child's face looking for your loved one instead. Children, just like adults, long to be seen for who they are.

While some children appreciate comments that draw attention to traits they share with their deceased loved one, other children find the comparisons uncomfortable. If you're not sure whether your comment will be well-received, err on the side of caution and keep it to yourself. Or, ask the child for her thoughts. "Would you like it if I shared with you some ways you're like your mom?" You might be surprised by what she tells you! Be sure to listen attentively and respond with her needs in mind, not your own.

4. Expect and celebrate growth.

Children's bones heal much more quickly than adults' do. It's the beautiful design of nature. Kids have lots of growing left to do, and their bodies know it. In a similar way, children will move forward with their grief in ways that are very different from the adults around them. Their pace of processing will look different, their outward manifestations of loss will change as they age.

If a child no longer cries about a deceased loved one or talks about her, she may simply be moving forward with her grief in an age-appropriate way. We need not grieve this growth. We know that grief is a companion who will walk with that child through her life; we know there's no such thing as "moving on." So don't worry as your child's grief experience changes as she ages. Lord willing, she's got lots of living left to do. Celebrate her growth and resilience.

This information is not a substitute for professional medical or mental health advice. If you have concerns about your child's wellbeing, please consult your family physician or therapist.