



# The Power of Parenting: How to Help Your Child After a Parent or Caregiver Dies

## BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Parents are the best sources of safety, support, and healing for bereaved children. We understand that **each family is unique, with its own special cultural and spiritual practices**, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Below, you will find guidance from parents, foster families, grandparents, and other caregivers who have been through experiences of loss and grief and found ways to cope and manage that grief. There is no such thing as “perfect parenting,” but some of these ideas may be useful to you on your journey. Remember that you are not alone.

Drawing from research and the experiences of parents, we have listed some challenges that bereaved families face and ways to address them. You will find thoughts on helping your children face new fears; taking care of yourself; helping your kids maintain healthy connections; helping your children to embrace new beginnings or traditions; and seeking **support** from others.

“ We will all struggle and fall; we will know what it means to be both brave and brokenhearted. ”

~ Brene Brown

### 1 Facing New Fears

We often tell parents and caregivers to “follow your child’s lead” or “meet them where they are.” After a death, this may be hard to do, as kids may have hidden fears or worries that they hesitate to talk about because, in part, they are concerned about upsetting you. Letting your kids know that **you are interested in what they have to say and are willing to talk about and listen to whatever is on their mind**, no matter how painful, can make it easier for them to open up. Here are examples of how parents have helped their children to share their fears and find ways to cope with those fears after a death:

A few months after her stepdad died, my daughter said something that made me think she was really worried about me dying too. There was no reason to think I might die, and I often asked her if there was anything she wanted to talk about, so the fact she had been worrying so much really took my breath away. Now, when I notice she seems down, **I ask if she has been scared that she'll lose me too**, rather than waiting for her to bring it up.

~ Ramona L.

After her dad was killed, my niece stopped going to her after-school club and stopped hanging out with her friends. She finally told me that **she was scared of getting too close to other people** because she didn't want to feel sad if they left or if something happened to them. We talked about how much we would miss out on if we didn't allow ourselves to get close to other people—that's what life is all about.

~ Amelia M.

Over time, it became clear that the children started to forget certain details about memorable events, and this made them worry that they would forget even more important memories. To address this, we put together a **favorite memory recording**. We'd sit down and decide which story to focus on and then talk it out, filling in gaps wherever necessary. It's reassuring to have that as a record.

~ Sarah H.

## 2 Taking Care of You

As a parent, it may be hard to think about what you need if your kids are hurting. The reality is that **the more you do to take care of yourself, the better able you will be to take care of your child**. You may already have the social support resources you need through a spiritual/religious group, family members, friends, or neighbors. Or you may feel the need to seek out new people in your life who can understand what you're going through. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable and to ask for help is a critical first step. Here are examples from bereaved parents who made their self-care a priority:

Within 2 weeks of my partner dying, I instituted **self-care Saturdays**. I took up those offers from people to babysit. Sent the kids to playdates. I made my own healing as much of a priority as theirs.

~ Loreta S.

It wasn't until I made the time to come to therapy myself, that I realized I was hiding my feelings just to protect my kids. I felt like I was carrying all of their grief and mine at the same time. The best thing I did for them was **let go of my guilt and get the help I needed**.

~ Neo B.

I was so overwhelmed the first few months. I didn't know how to talk to the kids about their grief. But **I have a friend** who offered to check in with them, take them out. As I got stronger, I was able to return to being their primary emotional support.

~ Fernando M.

After my partner died, I had so many people ask me how I was doing and they seemed to need to talk about the circumstances of her death all over again. After a while, **I decided it wasn't my job** to take care of them by reliving her death every time I saw someone for the first time. After I figured out how to do that, I had a lot more energy to attend to my own experience and be there for my children.

~ Paulette L.



Gracie, 13,  
stomping out the grief that keeps coming back

After more than a year of living on autopilot, I realized it was time to create a life in this 'new normal' that would be healthy and happy for both my daughter and me. As a parent, it's instinctive to want to protect our children from the harsh realities of the world. But there's a lot of merit in **grabbing your own oxygen mask** first in order to best help the people you love. Be gentle with yourself and trust that you're doing the best job you can in any given moment. Your children will be okay because you take care of yourself, you acknowledge your loss, and you love them through it all.

~ Amy D.

## 3 Holding onto the Old While Embracing the New

It may be hard to decide which routines to keep and which to let go. **Predictability and structure helps kids feel safe**, but your new circumstances may mean you have to make some changes just to get through daily life. Here are examples from families who have navigated this tricky balancing act:



Holidays are tough. **It's okay to let go** of old traditions. Now, just the three of us go out for Chinese and a movie on Christmas Eve instead of the extended family dinner.

~ Jennie E.

My daughter freaked out the first time I tried to make cookies after my ex-wife died. She screamed at me and ran to her room. I tried to just let her be at first, but it wasn't until I sat down with her and said, 'I'm here and I'm all ears' that she told me how much my baking made her miss her mom (her mom made the best chocolate chip cookies). After we had a good cry, we talked about the fact that I'm never going to replace her mom, but **we can still do things she loved** to do as a way of keeping her with us.

~ Marcus R.

Sports had always been a big part of my son's life. After his mom passed he found it hard to be motivated to play and I wasn't sure if I should let him quit or force him to stay on the team. Fortunately, the coach held a team meeting to brainstorm ways the team could help support my son. Everyone stepped in and **even though it was the same team, we started several new traditions that year**. Our favorite - the coach's wife brought my son smoothies on game days because his mom had always made sure he ate healthy on game days. I don't know how we would have made it through the early months without his football coach and teammates.

~ Eli K

## 4 Creating Comforting Connections

It is often a struggle to help children stay connected to the person who died while knowing they need to move forward and make room for new relationships. **It is possible to do both**. Here are ways in which other bereaved parents faced this challenge:

We made a family bucket list. We're going to **honor Mom** by living our lives to the fullest.

~ John P.

We compiled a **scrapbook of letters** about their Dad from his friends and family. Now the girls will have memories of him besides their own.

~ Fatemah J.

Four years after being widowed, I've moved forward with a new partner, who is also widowed. We've made new traditions as a blended family but we've also **worked hard to decide together which traditions with our late spouses to keep alive**. So each fall, he rides the Mountain Coaster with my girls, just like their Dad did. And at the holidays, we return to the Christmas tree farm he went to with his wife. They may be gone physically but we keep their spirits with us this way.

~ Jean M.

A year after the father of my children died, we had a 'wiping of the tears' ceremony. During the year, there were various other ceremonies, including feasts and honoring celebrations which provided **opportunities to share stories**. Those stories made us laugh together and some made us cry together. The key word was 'together.' This is what we did and it helped.

~ Shannon C.

## 5 Seeking Support For Your Kids

One of the most important resources for children after the death of a parent or caregiver is **the stability, care, and support they receive within their family**. Finding opportunities to share positive activities together as part of the "new normal" is one way to reassure children of the family support they can continue to count on. However, when you are grieving, it can also be useful to have outside support persons who can step in when it feels like too much. For example, all across the country there are many grief support programs, grief camps, and mental health professionals who specialize in helping grieving children. Here are examples of different forms of support that have helped bereaved families:

My 10-year-old really benefited from attending a grief camp for kids. It's **helped her find other kids** who have lost a parent too. She doesn't feel so alone anymore.

~ Jodi R.

Putting my son into a group therapy for grieving children a few months after his father's death was the best decision I ever made in this process. He was able to sort out his feelings and did it along with peers. I think this allowed him to **open up more about how he was feeling** and gave me some comfort as the parent.

~ Toya C.



Veda, 9,  
working with her counselor

My foster son refused therapy, so rather than force him to go, I **made special times** when just he and I could talk. I left that time open to visit his dad's grave or do whatever activity he wanted that would help him grieve.

~ Diane L.

Growing up in my family, I was always told that therapy was for 'crazy people' but when I finally took my child to see a grief counselor, I felt like 100 pounds had been lifted from my shoulders. I knew she was in good hands, and I could breathe again knowing that **it wasn't all up to me** to take her pain away.

~ Ryan L.

In addition to the ideas shared above by parents and caregivers, here are other resources:

There is a wealth of support and information available online that may be a good fit for you and your family. One parent chose the sites, UNC [widowedparent.org](http://www.widowedparent.org) and Soaring Spirits International at [www.soaringspirits.org](http://www.soaringspirits.org), because in her community there were few support groups available, and she felt more comfortable talking about difficult things with people she wasn't likely to see at the grocery store or kids' school functions. Other parents have found The Shared Grief Project helpful at <http://sharedgrief.org>. This website contains videotaped interviews of famous/successful adults who, as children, experienced the death of a parent. Kids easily relate to and admire the people in the videos and may be inspired by their stories.

There are a variety of professional organizations dedicated to supporting bereaved youth and providing information about evidence-based practices:

The Trauma and Grief Center:  
<https://www.texaschildrens.org/departments/trauma-and-grief-center>

NY Life Foundation:  
<https://www.newyorklife.com/foundation/bereavement>

Family Bereavement Program:  
<http://reachinstitute.asu.edu/programs/resilientparent>

National Alliance for Grieving Children:  
<https://childrengrieve.org>

While some families have found help online, others find it close to home. Sometimes help comes from professionals in the field, other times it comes from friends and family. There are likely many natural supports in your community. Widows/widowers groups, bereavement centers, churches, spiritual leaders, community or neighborhood elders, and even after-school clubs are often ready and willing to help. Regardless of how you seek out help, **please remember that you are not on this journey alone.**

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/the-power-of-parenting-how-to-help-your-child-after-a-parent-or-caregiver-dies>

This fact sheet was co-sponsored by New York Life. Drawing from experiences of bereaved caregivers, researchers, and mental health professionals, the developers of this fact sheet include Chris Foreman and Julie Kaplow, along with Shannon Cross-Bear, Sarah Gardner, Jill Harrington-Lamorie, Jeanette Koncikowski, Diane Lanni, and Irwin Sandler.

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.