

# Kids Express Program

## Dear Parent or Caregiver,

There is nothing that can prepare you for this moment. It is a shock to hear the words, "Your loved one has died." You may feel lost and overwhelmed. Our hope is that these materials will help you talk with your children about death and grief. It is important for them to have information and to encourage them to ask questions. Let your children know that each person in your family may grieve differently. Each of you may have different feelings and ways of acting at different times. This is a time to talk about your family's cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs about death. It is okay for you not to have all the answers.

You and your family are receiving information about kids and grief and some resources to help you and your children express your feelings.

You may receive a "Feeling Hearts Bag" (Bag with many colored hearts). This is an activity to talk about feelings. Pick a heart and talk about why you picked that color or texture; or talk about a memory of your loved one who died. Sometimes it can help to have a heart in your pocket or hand. Children and teens might want to take a heart to school, or hold one when you are not with them.

Remember there is no one right way to talk with your children. You know them best. You will find the right words at the right times. There will be many chances to talk about the death in the coming weeks and months.

You and your children need to know that the painful feelings will come and go. Over time the feelings will be less raw, and things won't feel as terrible. You and your children will not forget or stop loving your loved one. The children should be encouraged to enjoy things during the grieving process. The parent who died would want them to enjoy life and be happy. Tell the children this so they will not feel guilty.

We know this is a difficult time for you and your family. We are here to help.

Please call us with any questions or concerns.

*Note: We have used examples in the brochures that use either "mother" or "father". Please use the name that works for your children and situation.*



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# Talking to Your Children About the Death

When a parent dies, it is important that the children be told of the death. It is best if the surviving parent can tell the children. If that is not possible, someone the children know well should tell them.

## Tips for talking to children:

- Talk to the child on the child's level. Make eye contact. Sit near the child.
- Calmly tell the child what happened. If you are upset, have a friend or family member with you. It is okay for you to cry.
- Be honest. Use the words: dead and died.
- Answer the child's questions. Let the child know they can ask questions whenever they need to. It is okay for you to say, "I don't know. What do you think?"
- Tell all children that the death is not their fault.
- Tell all children they are safe and that you and others will take care of them.

## For younger children (ages 6 and younger)

**Tell the child that "Mommy or Daddy died." Explain what "dead" means in concrete and simple words.**

"Mommy's body isn't working anymore. Her heart stopped beating. She isn't breathing anymore. She is not hungry. She can't feel, taste, hug or sleep. She doesn't feel sad, scared or happy. She is dead. I'm very sad and I miss her. A lot of our family and friends are very sad. Sometimes we might cry and that is okay."

**"It is not your fault. You did not cause the death."**

Repeat this phrase often. Remind young children that they did not cause their parent's death. Young children often have "magical thinking." This means they believe if they think or imagine something, they can make it happen.

## Can Mommy or Daddy come back?

Remember children this age do not understand that death is permanent. They think that death is reversible and the person can become alive again. Young children might ask questions about the death over and over. This is normal. Plan on repeating your words.

**Some explanations of death are confusing or troubling to children.**

Try not to say things like: "He passed away"; "He went to sleep"; "He was too good and God took him to be with God"; "He is in a better place." These phrases can make children scared to go to sleep or worried that someone will take them or another loved one away. Young children will understand "heaven" as a concrete place. They might ask if they can go visit.

**Tell the children you love them. Give lots of extra hugs.**

# Talking to Children About the Death

## For older children (7yrs and up)

Older children will need the same information, but with more detail. They might have more questions about the body and what caused the death. Children this age are beginning to understand that death is permanent.

### Tell them:

- What happened.
- Where the body is now.
- What is going to happen next (if there will be a funeral or memorial service).
- Focus on the questions the child has. Answer the questions asked.
- Let the children know they can come to you at any time with more questions. “No question is silly or dumb.”
- Remind the children that they did not cause the parent’s death.
- Give lots of extra hugs.

## Teenagers

Teens can try to act like adults. You need to remember that inside they are still children. Adolescence is a time when teens are supposed to separate from their parents. A parental death can complicate this.

### Teens might:

- Want more information shared with them.
- Ask questions.
- Want to be more involved in making decisions (about the memorial service or funeral).
- Have concerns about finances and their future plans. Talk with them about this.
- Want to talk and spend more time with their peers. This is normal.
- Need to be reminded that they did nothing to cause parent’s death.
- Need adults to be there to listen to them and offer hugs.

## Other things to know about children and grief

Children grieve in “feeling bursts.” They might cry, and then want to go play with friends. This is very normal.

Children can also say things that are hard to hear. They might try to blame the person that died. This is their way of trying to make sense of why this terrible thing has happened. They might ask when they are going to get a new parent.

### Common reactions when children are grieving:

- Have an increase in fears and worries (fear of the dark or being alone)
- Trouble sleeping (falling asleep or nightmares)
- Changes in appetite (eating more or not hungry)
- Stomachaches, headaches or other physical complaints
- More irritable, whiny, or clingy (not wanting to leave a parent or have parent leave them)
- Bedwetting or toileting accidents
- Have bursts of feelings, often sadness or anger
- Poor concentration or seem to daydream

If these reactions continue over a long period of time or if you are worried about how your child is coping, call your child’s pediatrician. You can also talk to a mental health professional who has experience with children and grief.

# Preparing Children for a Memorial Service or Funeral

Families make many choices about when a child is old enough to go to a funeral or a memorial service. You know your child best. Most children ages 4 and older can benefit from being at their parent's service if they want to go. It helps children to say goodbye to their parent.

## Explain what a memorial service or funeral is and what will happen.

You might say, "A memorial service or funeral is when family and friends come to say goodbye to a person they love." If possible, visit the location with the children before the service.

## Describe what they will see and hear.

You can ask your clergy/ minister or funeral professional to help anticipate what the children will see.

### Tell the child:

- **What will happen.**
- **Who will be there?**
- **The emotions people might have.**

## Ask if they want to go to the memorial service or funeral.

Children, no matter what their age, should not be forced to attend the service. Talking about why they don't want to go and what they think will happen can help you to reassure them. However, it is best to honor a child's wishes if he expresses a strong desire not to go. In this case, involve the child in other ways. The child could draw a picture, pick a song or write something and have an adult read it at the service. It can be helpful to videotape the service if a child chooses to not go.

If the children attend the service, assign an adult to each child. This person can take the child outside to play or into another room if the child feels overwhelmed and needs a break. It is best if the adult is someone the child knows well, but is not invested in listening or participating in the service.

This can also be helpful for older children. The adult can check in with them throughout the day to see how they are doing.

Families might decide to not have the youngest children present if there is a burial. If this is the case:

- Explain to the child what will happen.
- Tell the child that they can visit the grave at a later date.
- If the child expresses a wish to go, it is best to let them. Talk to the child about what they will see and what will happen.

**Important: No child should go to a funeral or memorial service without being prepared for what he will see and what will happen.**

## Ways to involve children in funerals or memorial services.

- Draw pictures, make cards or put mementoes in the casket
- Select songs, readings, poems
- Write a letter or choose a poem or reading for the service
- Place a flower on the casket
- Pick out photographs to be displayed

## Talk with children after the memorial service or funeral.

It is important to check in with each child after the service. Ask them:

- What did you see?
- Was it what you expected?
- What feelings did you have?
- Do you have any questions or worries?

## Memory collecting for the children

If there are family and friends coming to the service, it can be helpful to have them write down their favorite memories or funny stories about the parent that has died. The more detailed and the more specific the memory is the better. These can be collected and put in books for each child. They will become a treasure for children in the years to come.

Children may want to return to school soon after the death. Schools offer structure, routine, and the support of friends and caring adults, such as teachers and counselors. In order for your child to be supported during his grief, it is important to talk with your child's school.

## **Call the school.**

Ask to speak with the principal, your child's teacher or school counselor. The school should be told of the death and what information you want shared with the staff, class or school. Many schools have a crisis team that can come talk with the school staff and children

Let the child know the adults at school were told. Talk with your child about what information will be shared with his friends and classmates.

## **Make a plan with the teacher or school.**

Discuss what information will be shared with classmates. Your child will want to know what his friends were told. The teacher can talk with your child's classmates about how they can welcome your child back to school.

## **Preparing for a return to school.**

Many children will want school to be a place where things are as normal as possible. They don't want to be different. Talk with your child about going back to school. Where does he want to go first? To the classroom? To visit a teacher or counselor? Ask your child if he wants adults to check in with him. Have the child pick a person he will go to if he is having a tough day.

## **Role-play responses.**

If your child is concerned about what others will say, you can practice what he will say. Many children may not want people (adults or peers) asking questions. It helps for the child to know what to say. "Thanks for caring, but I don't want to talk about it now."

## **Staying in touch with school staff.**

Talk to your child's teacher about the best way to share your concerns. If a child is having trouble concentrating, extra support will help. School staff may need to be reminded that grief lasts a long time. Ask them to be sensitive around parental events at school.

# Taking Care of Yourself

This is a difficult time for you. There will be many things to take care of and to do in the coming days.

## Put yourself first.

If you take care of yourself, then you will be able to support your children and help them express their grief. You are their first model for how someone copes with a death.

## Things that might help.

- Eat nutritious meals.  
(Ask people to provide and bring these to you.)
- Drink lots of water or other liquids.  
(Limit caffeine and alcohol.)
- Get lots of rest. Grieving can make you feel very tired. You might need to nap some days.
- Exercise on a regular basis. Ask a friend to take walks with you or to be a partner at the gym.
- At first, if you are having trouble sleeping at night, talk to your doctor. Using medicine to help you sleep will help you be more available to your children during the day.

## Make a plan for what you need to do to help yourself with your own grief.

Grieving can feel like a rollercoaster. There can be many ups and downs and this can change from hour to hour or day to day. Give yourself permission to spend time with your children, as well as time away from your children. Planning a break on a consistent day and time with a babysitter can help both you and your children.

## There is no one right way to grieve.

Trust yourself. People might have lots of suggestions for you as to what you should be doing. Only you will know what will be helpful for you.

## Pay attention to your feelings.

Let yourself cry. It is okay to do this in front of the children. Feeling numb, angry, distracted, or anxious are all part of grieving. It is all right to laugh, remember and talk about the person who died.

This is part of grieving too. Some people find that joining a grief support group can be a place to talk and be with others who are also grieving.

## Ask for help.

You will need many kinds of support in the coming days and weeks. Ask a few close friends or family to help organize others in ways that will be helpful to you. The help might be bringing food, making calls, or helping the children to get to their activities.

- For people that use the Internet, the web site **lotsahelpinghands.com** can help organize your friends, family or people in your community that want to help you.

## Reduce extra stress.

You do not need to be perfect. Try to let go of the things that don't need to be done. Assign those tasks you don't have the energy to do to others.

If possible, do not make any big changes or decisions right away.

## One more thought

Grieving is a personal process. No two people will grieve the same. There will be many ups and downs. Trust yourself about what you need to do. And remember to take good and gentle care of yourself.



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## **SOCIAL SERVICES**

Massachusetts General Hospital  
Social Services Department  
Kids Express Program  
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617-726-2643

*The Kids Express Program provides free therapeutic materials and resources to MGH patients and families who are experiencing sudden illness, trauma, or grief. The Kids Express Program is primarily funded through donations and grants. All contributions are welcome and appreciated.*

*To find out more about the Kids Express Program or make a donation, please call 617-726-2643.*