

A Community of Caring: Suggestions for Supporting Grieving Children, Youth, and their Family

The death of a younger person is upsetting not only for the family that has experienced the loss, but also for the person's extended family, friends and community members. Whether the person who died was a young parent or a child, the death leaves us feeling lost for how best to help the grieving family members.

THE FOLLOWING ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO SUPPORT A GRIEVING FAMILY IN YOUR COMMUNITY:

Reach out to the family.

Death makes us uncomfortable so we tend to avoid grieving families out of concern that we will do or say the wrong thing. At the very time that they need their friends and community the most, bereaved families find that people withdraw and disappear. Although it can feel uncomfortable at first, reaching out to the family lets them know that you truly care.

Don't be afraid to say the words.

Often grieving children and their parents don't talk honestly about their death loss because they feel the need to protect others people's feelings. Yet it is also important not to pry with too many questions, which can result in them feeling invaded. The best approach is to acknowledge the death openly and honestly, and offer to let the grieving person talk with you about it when they are ready.

Don't minimize their loss.

Seeing another person in pain is hard. We just want them to feel better. However, minimizing their loss makes them feel worse, not better. It's best to avoid statements like "they're in a better place". Instead, speak truthfully, for example, "I don't have anything to say to make you feel better, but I care about you".

Don't say that you will help if you cannot keep your promise.

Our instinct is to tell the grieving family that we are there for them, to help with whatever they need. However, it does more harm than good when many people make empty promises and then disappear. It's best to offer only what you can truly manage to help with.

Offer concrete assistance.

Ask the grieving family what they need and let them know that it is not an inconvenience for you to help. So many grieving parents won't ask for help because they do not want to impose on others. While food donations can provide comfort, what is often needed is practical help, such as providing a regular drive to a team sport practice, or picking up a few groceries, or providing occasional childcare so that they can get out of the house to run their own errands.

Keep in touch and check in long after the funeral.

Many grieving parents report that there was a flurry of people and activity up to and just after the funeral, and then people start to disappear. We don't have to know the right thing to say or do, just checking in and spending time with the grieving person or family is helpful.

Don't be offended if they refuse your help right now.

The changes and emotional turmoil after the death of a close family member can cause grieving family members to feel overwhelmed and needing space. If they decline your support, the best response is to let them know that you'll be there for them when they're ready.



A Community of Caring: Suggestions for Talking with and Supporting a Grieving Child or Teen and their Family



Children and teens grieve too.

So often, the focus of support goes to the her because we forget that children and teens feel the death loss, or because we don't know how to support them. It's important to let the child or teen know that we are there for them too. Children need honest language, not euphemisms, in order to understand and process the death.

Help build the memory bank of stories about the person who died.

Take time to share your stories of the person who died and the ways they touched your life. Children and teens need others to help them build up a bank memories to help keep the person's memory alive.

Grieving children and teens need permission and encouragement to continue having fun. Offer to take them on a fun outing. Grieving parents may want to come along, or they may choose to take a much-needed break for some self-care.

Don't judge.

Just as we all have unique personalities, each of us grieves in our own way. While some will

shed a lot of tears and talk about their loss, other people will be more private. Children tend to puddle jump in their grief, moving from a burst of tears one moment then back to fun and play the next. Regardless of how the person appears on the outside, know that they are grieving the loss in the way that is most helpful for them at the time.

Be patient.

Grieving children, teens, and parents may seem different from how they were before the death, especially early on in their grief journey. Children may be more clingy, whining, distracted or unusually active. Teens may be irritable, brooding, or seem not to care about anything. Parents may seem to be in a fog, withdrawn, or easily frustrated. Your patience and expressions of caring will help the grieving family through this emotionally difficult time.

Understand and be sensitive to the fact that grief is a lifelong journey.

Whether the death occurred a week, months or years ago, children and their families will grieve the loss throughout their life. We don't get over our grief, we just learn to live with it.

The greatest healing comes from the love and care of family and community.

*If you have concerns for a grieving family in your community and feel it would be helpful to talk through how you can support the family, you are welcome to contact The Lighthouse for a telephone consultation at **905.337.2333**.*