



Has your child recently experienced a loss?

Maybe his pet dog died. Or maybe you recently divorced. Grieving can be difficult for children, who don't know how to process their emotions yet. So be sure to talk with your kids if they have experienced a loss. As much as you want to protect them, don't lie about the situation. But at the same time, don't tell them more than they can handle. If it's a divorce, leave the messy details out of it. Make sure they know it's not their fault. *And encourage your children to talk about their loss, and to come to you with their questions.*

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Loving Father,
I pray today for all who have died,
especially _____,
whom I love very much.
I believe that he/she is with you now
in heaven, safe in your loving arms,
and that one day
I will see him/her there.
Until then,
I ask you to hug him/her
close to your heart. Amen.

Ellen Kendig, *Children's Book of Family Blessings*



Talking with Your Kids about Death or Divorce

In her book, *Encouragement for Busy Moms: "Honey, Hang in There!"*, author Sandra P. Aldrich provides encouragement, including a section on how to talk with children about tough issues such as death or divorce. She offers the following guidelines in talking with your children about traumatic issues:

- ◆ **Don't Lie about the Situation.** In an effort to protect their children from the truth, many parents soften the situation by creating explanations such as, "Daddy is on a long trip," or "We took the dog to a farm." But according to the author, "Not only are these lies, but they postpone having to tell the truth that the grandmother has died or the father has walked out."
- ◆ **Know What Your Child Can Handle.** While the author warns against lying to protect your children, she also cautions against revealing too much. Know what your children are capable of understanding and processing for their age and temperament. For example, if there was a divorce, children do not need to hear the details of any cases of adultery or other serious problems. But be willing to listen to your children's questions. It will probably be hard for you to hear them, but responding with, "I don't want to talk about it," will only set up a wall between you and your child.
- ◆ **Let Your Children Express Their Feelings.** Unfortunately many adults who have a difficult time coping with their own feelings of loss will suppress those painful emotions, and as a result encourage the same process in their children as well. Encourage your children to share their feelings and to express their emotions in a healthy way. This will not only help the healing process, but will help develop skills in dealing with stress and trauma in the future. Be sure to affirm your children by letting them express their emotions. Don't belittle them for feelings such as anger or guilt, but let them know their feelings are normal.
- ◆ **Ask Your Children How They Are Doing.** Don't assume that because your child isn't crying frequently or asking questions that they are handling things well. You never know what types of self-doubt or worries are going on in their minds. Be sure to ask your children if they have any questions or want to talk about their feelings.
- ◆ **Prepare for Guilt.** Many children take on responsibility for the loss of a loved one. Whether through divorce or death, children may secretly blame themselves. Make sure your children know that the situation is not their fault.
- ◆ **Focus on Your Children.** Many times a parent's grief over the loss of a spouse or loved one causes them to withdraw from others, including their children. But if you and your children have sustained a great loss, they will need you now more than ever for emotional support and guidance. If needed, seek the help of a friend or professional counselor to work through the grieving process. Call on friends and family to help with practical needs if you find yourself overwhelmed with daily tasks as a single parent.



In summary, Aldrich encourages parents by saying, "*Talking with and listening to children during these times not only acknowledges their grief but also affirms their importance within the family.*"

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Knowing What to Expect Can Help You Respond

Every child will react differently to the divorce or separation of his/her parents. Very little is known about the effects of divorce on **children younger than 2 years of age**. Very young children do not necessarily suffer just because a divorce has occurred. Both parents can stay actively involved in child rearing, or one parent can maintain a strong, healthy relationship with the child.



Children from 3 to 5 years tend to be fearful and resort to immature or aggressive behavior. They might turn to security blankets or old toys. Some may have lapses in toilet training. These types of behavior rarely last for more than a few weeks. Most children are confused about what is happening or about why mom or dad has left, and often deny that anything has changed. Preschoolers may also spend more time playing by themselves than with friends. They may show more anxiety, depression, anger, and apathy in their play and in their interactions with both children and adults. Socially, preschoolers tend to spend more time seeking attention and nearness of adults. At the same time, they may resist adult suggestions and commands. Some children become much more aggressive. On the positive side, preschool children also try to understand the situation. They attempt to bring some order to their world by trying to explain to themselves what is happening and by trying to be well behaved. Though it takes some time, most children gradually understand the situation and adjust.



Children 6 to 8 years have some understanding of what the divorce means. With their better sense of what is taking place, these children are able to deal with what is happening. Many young school-aged children experience deep grief over the breakup of the family. Some children are fearful and yearn for the absent parent. If the mother has custody, boys tend to behave aggressively toward her. Many children feel conflicts in loyalty to one parent or the other, even if the parents made no effort to make the child take sides.

Older school-age children—9 to twelve—try to understand the divorce and keep their behavior and emotions under control. While they may have feelings of loss, embarrassment, and resentment, these children actively involve themselves in play and activities to help manage these feelings. They may make up games and act out make-believe dramas concerning their parents' divorce. These activities seem to help the child cope with the situation. Anger is perhaps the most intense emotion felt by this age group. It may be aimed at one or both parents. These children may also be more easily drawn into choosing one parent over the other. Children who become drawn into struggles between parents tend to have more difficulties.



While **adolescents** understand the divorce situation better than younger children, they tend to experience some difficulties adjusting. Many teens may feel a loss of support in handling emerging sexual and aggressive feelings. In some cases, adolescents may even feel that they are in competition with their parents when they see them going on dates and becoming romantically involved. Sometimes, teens have grave doubts about their own ability to get or stay married. Many adolescents seem to mature more quickly following a divorce. They take on increased responsibilities in the home, show an increased appreciation of money, and gain insight into their own relationships with others. On the other hand, adolescents may be drawn into the role of taking care of the parent and fail to develop relationships with peers.



The signs and symptoms for all ages are similar to reactions to other stressful events. *The most important sign is any significant change in a child's usual pattern of behavior.* Some children will react by being easily angered, and others will react by withdrawing from their usual activities. Young children are more likely to show regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking, increased whining, difficulty making transitions, and increased need to be with a teacher or other caregiver. Older children are more likely to be disobedient, talk back, and be destructive. Many children will have trouble sleeping; be unusually quiet or withdrawn; complain about headaches, stomachaches, and other symptoms of illness; and be distractible and restless. There also may be significant declines in school performance, tardiness, absences, and difficulties in getting along with peers. Few children will show all these signs, but almost all children will show some of these symptoms, especially when there are significant events at home such as a parent moving out, an appearance in court, or general disruptions in the usual routine.

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