

LOVE, LUCK AND COURAGE

Parenting the grieving child

“There really are places in the heart you don’t even know exist until you love a child.” —Anne Lamott

Parenting the grieving child has to be one of the most difficult tasks put towards a mother and father. Both parenting and grieving are processes filled with heart wrenching challenges; combined, they represent a black hole empty of energy and filled with painful emotion. After a child dies, it feels as if all the love, luck and courage have gone. Continuing to parent the remaining children in your care is often difficult and can feel overwhelming. Everyone is grieving in their own unique way, marked by profound emotional and physical needs. For parents, this is a time your children may need you the most and you may feel the least available. Here are some parenting ideas that might help as you work hard to provide a safe, nurturing environment despite the sadness and pain.

- Adopt the advice of the airlines – Take care of yourself first; this provides good role modeling and will help give you energy to parent your children.
- Balance love and structure – Children need your unconditional love and they need continued structure. Keep routines and maintain appropriate discipline. Remain consistent and patient in your discipline. This provides children with an important sense of security and safety.
- Communicate openly and honestly – Children need to know the truth about what has happened in their family. Secrets or half-truths can prove to be more harmful and add to their confusion. Always provide age appropriate explanations.
- Stay Connected – Your children need you to be involved. Any activity you do with them translates that you are here and still bonded to them. Make time to be with them, even doing simple tasks. Find time for fun, even if it is small moments that hopefully grow.
- Truly Listen – Be a supportive listener to your children. As you may have experienced for yourself, find space to be that person for your child. Listening to their concerns, fears and feelings can be a very healing process. You may be surprised by how “truly listening” can be helpful to you and your child. They do not always need us to fix everything.
- Teach positive coping – Help your children understand healthy ways to deal with the pain of grief. Guide them in ways to grow through their grief. For instance, allow for the expression of anger in hitting a pillow instead of their sibling. Take breaks in homework if they are having trouble concentrating.



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- Allow for the expression of emotions – Be aware that children often grieve through play and behaviors. Children need time and space to express their feelings; this may be through the creative arts, music, sports or writing. Their grief will not look like yours. Cry in front of your children; you are only showing them that tears are a sign of humanity and love.
- Create a community – It is impossible to parent alone, especially if you are a grieving parent. Find supports in your community, family and friends. Reach out to others who are willing to assist you. As the saying goes, it takes a village.

Your family has had a devastating event happen. The death of a child can feel as if the whole world has shattered and shifted. Recognize that parenting during such a time is incredibly challenging. Be kind to yourself. Remember, courage does not always roar; sometimes it is the quiet voice that tells us to try again tomorrow.

—C. Caryn Kondo, MSW



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