

## Helping Grieving Children Through the Holidays

*Adults play an important role in helping children grieve, especially over the holidays when new emotions and memories can hit with full force. Children often have trouble expressing their emotions, and when they see their parents hurting, they naturally want to protect their parents, so the children may not be open about their own grief. Close family friends and even other relatives can step in and assist the parent in helping the children grieve. The following are tips that a parent or another adult can use to help grieving children through the holidays.*

**Conversations and connections** ... Talk with them about their loved one. Be specific with good memories. Let children share their feelings and stories. Children may not always have the correct details. Talk about anything and everything. Keep the communication lines open by spending one-on-one time with a child who is grieving. This is especially important as you and the child remember your loved one's favorite holiday activities.

**Communicate** ... When discussing the death, explain to the children in simple terms that the person's body has quit working. Use the words "death" and "died" with the children. Steer clear of phrases such as "went to sleep." Since children are literal thinkers, they may be afraid to go to sleep.

**Contact** ... Appropriate hugs and kisses are a great way to stay in contact. Ask them how they would like to be greeted (e.g., by touching elbows, shoulders, the head or giving a high five). Respect their rights not to be touched also.

**Clown around** ... Children need to take breaks in their grieving. In other words they will not grieve continuously, every day, all day long. Let them laugh and kid around. It's okay to laugh. Laughter releases good endorphins in the brain.

**Create** ... Let them draw, color, paint or construct their world through blocks and other manipulative items. Make an ornament or a collage. What does my life look like? Who is in it? Who is not?

**Carry** ... Let them have a photo or small memento to carry with them. It helps them feel close. During the holidays, allow the children to keep pictures of their loved one from past holidays. Visit about how the holidays will be different but also how some traditions will be the same. Allow the children to have a loved one's shirt or other article of clothing to sleep in. You can even spray the item with perfume or aftershave that smells like their loved one.

**Cope** ... Let them journal. It could be in the form of a letter, a daily meditation with God or in a book form. (It's like peeling an onion and getting to the core, their heart.)

**Change** ... Allow the children to help make decisions about day-to-day living and holiday plans. The children may feel they have more control of the situation when they can help make decisions. Change is okay.

**Center** ... Remember the family is the center of your children's world. They need stability. You are it. However, if this is too much for you, then allow other adults to minister to your child. Always be close by so your children do not feel abandoned.

**Compose** ... Remember your children's world may be in chaos; they need structure (e.g., wake-up times, bed, meal, school, homework and television times). Christmas can be especially hard as they watch other families

celebrate and as everyone's schedules tend to be interrupted over the holidays.

**Composure** ... Don't feel like you always have to be composed. It is okay for the children to see your tears and to feel your pain. Ask your children for a hug on your down days.

**Care** ... Care for each other. Care for yourself by eating, exercising and sleeping well.

**Closeness** ... Stay close to your children through daily talks or activities. One of the best places to get a child to talk is in the car. During the holidays play your loved one's favorite Christmas music when in the car. Encourage the children to sing along. This might lead to a healthy discussion about the things their loved one liked about the holidays.

**Cook** ... Let them bake a special holiday meal or dessert in memory of their loved one. Invite family and friends to join in. If their loved one had a favorite Christmas candy or a favorite Thanksgiving dessert, encourage the child to make those items and talk about how much the loved one enjoyed these favorite items.

**Celebrate** ... Let them go to holiday parties and family get-togethers. Make new memories and new traditions.

**Candlelight memorial service** ... Let them honor the memory of their loved one.

**Compassion** ... Let them help those who are less fortunate than themselves. (Get a gift for another child, deliver meals to a less fortunate family or assist at a shelter feeding the homeless.)

**Church** ... Give them a center of community, a place where they can praise and worship God.

**Christ** ... Give them hope. A personal relationship with Jesus is the best gift you can give a child. Prayer is beneficial; it helps to de-stress them.

**Comfort** ... Remember to pray for your children to be comforted. Pray in front of the children and with the children.

**Closure** ... There really is no such thing as "closure." For the rest of the children's lives, the loved one will be remembered. Children do eventually process and learn to cope and are able to move on with their lives. Encourage them to find ways to honor and remember their loved one and let them know this is okay to do.

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by Jodi Rule-Rouse and Linda Ranson Jacobs

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