

## On Parenting

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Perspective

# Children process grief differently than adults. Here's what parents need to know.

By Marjorie Clark Brimley

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One day last summer, as the sun set and I splashed in the neighbourhood pool with my three kids, I noticed my 10-year-old daughter standing alone. "I miss Dad," she said, choking a bit on the last word.

"Oh, baby," I said and went to hug her. She was looking up at the deck above the pool. Many of her friends' fathers were gathered there, grilling and talking. She told me she wanted things to be like they used to be, that she wanted her dad there, drinking beer with the other dads and playing with her and her brothers in the pool. "Why was *he* the one who died?" she asked.

Her father had succumbed to an aggressive cancer a year and a half earlier, and I had spent a lot of time since then making sure that my kids remained emotionally whole. But they were so young when it happened — my youngest was in diapers — so sometimes it seemed as though they would more easily recover from this loss than I would. They still played tag with their friends and rolled down grassy hills and screamed with joy when the ice cream truck drove by.

But grief can be sneaky. My daughter was simply enjoying the last days of her summer holiday when she was hit with the realization, again, that her dad was gone. I panicked. What was the right thing to say?

Since my husband died, I've met many parents who struggle with how to help their children grieve. Knowing what to do and say can seem quite complicated, especially if the parent is also suffering, says Vicki Jay, the chief executive of the National Alliance for Grieving Children. "This is complicated by the fact that even though both parent and child may have experienced the same loss, they may be handling the grief in very different ways and in very different periods of time," Jay wrote in an email.

But parents want answers. Jenny Lisk, host of the Widowed Parent Podcast, said in an email that when her husband died of brain cancer, she searched everywhere for a book that would tell her how to parent her 9- and 11-year-old children through the loss. At the time, she wondered, "How was I supposed to support them and hopefully not completely ruin their lives?"

The answer isn't simple, because children's grief often goes unrecognized or isn't talked about. Mary Beth Prieur, a pediatric psychologist who is a member of the pediatric palliative care team at the University of North Carolina Children's Hospital, said in an email that the "taboo subjects" of death and bereavement are often ignored not just by the larger community, "but also by well-

meaning family members who worry about the potential negative impact of discussing grief and loss.”

*She lost her husband, her father and a pregnancy at 31. Now she's helping others explore grief.* In an effort to encourage discussion, Children’s Grief Awareness Month in November highlights these “forgotten mourners.” But what can parents do on an individual level?

First and foremost, experts encourage parents to talk to their kids, at every age, about their loss. Truth must be at the heart of these discussions, according to Justin Yopp, a clinical psychologist with the Widowed Parent Program at the University of North Carolina. While it is natural for parents to want to protect their children from becoming upset, hiding the truth is not recommended.

“Children almost always know more than we think they do; being honest gives them permission to talk about it,” Yopp said in an email.

This is true even when the cause of death is something a parent would rather avoid discussing. “Telling kids their parent died of an accident or heart attack, when they really died by suicide or a drug overdose is likely to make an already terrible situation much worse,” Lisk said. Kids eventually learn the truth and need to know they can trust their caregivers.

Both Yopp and Lisk noted that this doesn’t mean telling kids every detail about a loved one’s death. The information children will be able to process depends on their age and developmental stage. Prieur also pointed out that “magical thinking” is prominent in childhood and can lead children to believe they may have influenced a loved one’s death by, say, not being kind to a sibling or refusing to eat broccoli.

“As they grow older, many children may ask these questions on a bigger, philosophical level,” Prieur said, including questions like “why did this happen to me?” Being direct and honest can help kids at all stages.

It is often useful for parents to explicitly give children permission to grieve while also modelling what healthy grieving looks like. “This includes talking about the person who died, normalizing emotional reactions they may have, not feeling ashamed to cry or emote, and demonstrating that there is no timetable for grief,” said Yopp.

It may also mean allowing kids to grieve in a much different way than society would expect of an adult. Prieur said that children may be sad one moment and playing tag the next moment, and that is normal.

Catherine Andrews, a psychotherapist who works with bereaved children in Washington, D.C., said in an email that kids are hard-wired to survive, so they may be primarily concerned with questions such as, “Who is going to take me to soccer if mom is dead?” While parents may find such a focus shocking, it is a normal part of processing, especially for young children. “They need to know who they can depend on and for what,” Andrews said.

Experts warn that there is no single way to identify grief in kids or help them through it. That said, finding snippets of time throughout the day to discuss a child's feelings can be useful. Jay and Yopp both said the best opportunities may come at bedtime, dinnertime or while driving in the car, as children can choose how much to engage in face-to-face conversation.

"Parents often feel pressure to say *just the right thing* when talking with their children," Yopp said. "There is no need for this. It's fine to not always know the right thing to say or how to say it. Children don't need perfect parents — just ones that are present, honest and available."

I didn't have all this expert advice when I saw my daughter's face that day at the pool. I certainly wasn't ready for her grief, as she had just been happily splashing in the water with her friends. As I went over to her, and wrapped my arms around her little body, I thought for a moment about what to say.

I told her I missed her dad too, and mentioned how much he loved being at the pool with her, and how good his hamburgers were. I told her that he'd be happy that I'm learning how to grill and that we're surrounded by so many people who love her.

She looked at me. The hurt showed in her face. Then she laid her head on my chest for a moment, and I squeezed her tight.

After awhile, she caught my eye, and smiled slightly. Her eyes crinkled at the sides, just like her father's once had. She asked if we could get some ice cream after dinner and added, "Dad loved to do that."

I smiled back at her. "You bet," I said.

*By day, Marjorie Brimley is a high school teacher and mother of three. She spends her nights replaying the crazy encounters that go along with recently becoming a widow and blogging about them at [DCwidow.com](http://DCwidow.com). You can find her on Facebook and Twitter @[@dcwidowblog](https://twitter.com/dcwidowblog).*