How to Support Bereaved Children Over the Holidays: A Tip Sheet for Parents and Caregivers
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For most children and families, the holiday season is a happy time that they look forward to all year, but experiencing the death of a loved one can make holiday gatherings especially difficult. Being around people, places, situations, or holiday rituals that serve as reminders of the deceased can be emotionally painful for bereaved families, including both parents and children. Being a bereaved parent can be especially challenging because it involves dealing with your own grief reactions while also managing your child’s grief. Based on our work with bereaved families and recent research findings, this tip sheet provides suggestions about how parents and other caregivers can help their bereaved children cope with the holiday season. Although some of these suggestions may seem overwhelming at first (especially if you have lost someone recently), trying out even one or two suggestions can help you figure out what might be most helpful to your family.

1. **Understand that family members grieve differently.**
Different family members can, and usually do, grieve in different ways. Bereaved children often experience a wide range of reactions to the holidays. Some children want to talk a lot about the death and how much they miss the deceased person, and others may not want to talk at all. Some kids may be extremely sad and tearful, while others may not show much emotion. When considering how children grieve, keep in mind that there is no official “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. “Good” grief is grieving in ways that help you and your family to adjust to the death of your loved one. Our research shows that **the most helpful thing you can do as a parent or caregiver is to validate how your child is feeling and be present and available for them when they need you.**
For example, you might say:

- “We may sometimes grieve (express our feelings) in different ways, but we are all in this together.”
- “This is not an easy time of year for us, but I’ll do my best to be there for you.”
- “I want to be the most helpful I can be. If you feel like talking, I’m here for you. If you just want a hug or to have a good cry, that’s OK too. You decide what will help you the most.”
2. **It’s not so much what you say, but how you say it.**
Parents can communicate in powerful ways without saying a word, just through body language. Parents of bereaved kids can find themselves worrying about saying just the right thing at just the right time, especially during the holidays. It can be a relief to know that it’s not so much *what* parents say to their children – it’s *how* they say it. Supportive parenting behaviors can help children to grieve in helpful ways. These behaviors share a common theme: *I am here for you when you need me.* They include:
- parental warmth, caring, or kindness
- hugging or other forms of physical affection
- smiling
- listening attentively and enthusiastically to what your child is sharing
- enjoying your child’s company, even if you’re going through a difficult time
- maintaining good eye contact
These behaviors can go a long way towards helping children feel more at ease during the holidays, when they may be facing powerful reminders of the loss.

Bereaved children are often very “tuned in” to the emotions of their surviving parent. They may worry that talking about the deceased person will be upsetting to people they love and care about, especially during the holidays. For this reason, children may avoid talking about the deceased to protect family members from further distress. Parents’ ability to show (including through body language) a genuine interest in their children’s thoughts and feelings about the deceased person can reduce children’s distress and promote feelings of positive connection to the deceased.

3. **It’s OK to be sad in front of your children.**
Bereaved parents have the extremely difficult job of dealing with their own grief reactions during the holidays while trying to manage those of their children at the same time. Bereaved parents sometimes worry that they will upset their children by showing their own grief or sadness. We’ve learned that it’s important for children to see that their parents are human, too. By allowing your child to see you feeling sad (or even crying), it sends the message that it is OK and normal to be sad after a loved one dies, and that crying is a natural reaction to missing someone you love. Children can sometimes assume that *they* have done something wrong if you become upset. It can be helpful to reassure them and teach them about grief by saying something like:
- “Sometimes I may get upset when we’re planning our holiday celebrations without Dad, because I really miss him. It’s natural to feel sad.”
- “Sometimes it feels good to cry and let it all out.”
4. Provide opportunities for kids to feel comforting connections with their deceased love one.
The holidays are often a time when children really miss the deceased person and may feel more disconnected from him/her, especially if the death occurred a long time ago. It can be helpful for parents to provide their children with opportunities to feel more connected to the deceased, if children are ready. This can include sharing stories about the deceased person, looking at pictures, holding his or her favorite things, or reading his or her letters. It may also help to set apart a special time during the holiday to share things people may have said at the memorial service, or since that time, that help to honor the deceased’s memory.
For example, you might say:
• “Is there anything you’d like to do during the holidays to remember _____?”
• “Dad loved apple pie. Maybe we can make one for the holidays in his honor.”
• “I’ve been going through some of mom’s things. Is there anything of hers you’d like to keep for yourself or wear during the holidays? You can put it in a safe place and bring it out only when you want to.”

Religious or spiritual families may find it helpful to share beliefs that are often comforting to children (e.g., Dad is your guardian angel and is watching over you; Mom can still be here with us in spirit during the holidays). These discussions can help children feel closer to the deceased and reduce their separation distress.

5. Take good care of yourself.
One of the best ways to take care of your children after a death is to take good care of yourself and get the support you need. Parents are often so worried about caring for their children and ensuring that the holidays are a happy time for them, that they forget to care for themselves. Getting the support you need is just as critical as caring for your child. It not only helps ensure that you will be ready and able to help your child, but it’s an ideal time to model good self-care—including asking for help if you need it. Adequate sleep, going for walks or other exercise, and proper eating can go a long way towards keeping you physically and mentally healthy. It is important to know that it often helps children to see adults grieving in normal ways, such as expressing sadness, sharing that they are missing the person, and sharing physical comfort such as hugs. On the other hand, crying uncontrollably or being unable to carry out simple daily tasks are signs that you may need extra support and should reach out for help.
6. **Keep an eye out for signs that professional help may be needed.**
Most bereaved children and teens adjust to their “new normal” and go on to lead productive and healthy lives. Some grief-related distress is entirely understandable and expectable, and can often become stronger during the holiday season. For example, children often have fantasies about seeing the deceased person again, especially during the holidays. Their mood can also change quickly, from feeling happy and laughing one moment, to really missing their loved one and feeling like crying the next (such as enjoying dad’s favorite dessert one minute, and then feeling sad that dad isn’t there to enjoy it the next). It is helpful to give children time and space to grieve, and to trust that these reminders of the loss will become less painful and more comforting over time. However, it is important to keep a watchful eye out for behaviors that may signal the need to follow up with a mental health professional for a more in-depth assessment. These behaviors include:

- An inability to keep up with daily tasks, such as going to school, completing homework assignments, or maintaining adequate personal hygiene.
- Intense sadness, tearfulness, lethargy, or social withdrawal that persist for at least six months after the death.
- Reckless or risky behaviors (drug use, drunk driving, stealing, reckless driving, etc.).
- Inability to talk about the death, or appearing numb, emotionless, or disconnected from the reality of the death.
- Expressing the wish to hurt oneself, even if it is in an attempt to be reunited with the deceased in an afterlife.

7. **Balance cherishing memories of the past with making new memories for the future.**
Although the holidays can be a difficult time for bereaved families, parents can help their children to remember and honor their deceased loved ones while creating new, meaningful holiday memories. Thoughtful balancing of comforting holiday traditions with open, honest discussions and new celebratory activities can help reduce distress, help children feel connected to their deceased loved one, and encourage a positive outlook towards the future as you enter the New Year.

- It can be helpful to celebrate a former tradition that you shared with the deceased while they were alive (like watching their favorite movie or playing their favorite game), while also creating a new positive tradition (like trying out a new movie or playing a new game).