



When a Child Dies: A Guide for Family and Friends

“There is a beginning and ending for everything that is alive. And in between is living.”

These touching words come from *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. This is a lovely book that offers parents and children a simple wisdom that while endings are a natural part of life, sometimes things go wrong through sickness or injury that can make a lifetime end sooner. Plants, creatures and, yes, even children may die.

Regardless of the length of the child’s life or illness, his or her lifetime is unique; worth honoring and celebrating even when death comes at a young age. Unfortunately, because friends may find themselves unable to cope with their own grief and sadness or the grief and sadness of the parents, grieving parents often become isolated. You want to help, but how?

Things you can do to support the child’s family during this time of sorrow:

- Listen—offer a place of comfort and safety for your friend to express sorrow. You will be offering your friend a huge gift by listening without passing judgment or attempting to fix the pain.
- Say the name of the child who died out loud—grieving parents often find it comforting to hear the name of their child spoken aloud and know that their child is remembered and missed.
- It is important to parents and other family members—and to you—that you let them know through words or action that you will be there to help them through this difficult time. Don’t let the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing stop you from supporting your friend.

Things you can do to support the child's family during this time of sorrow: (CONTINUED)

- Be patient. Remember grief has no timeline. We visit and revisit all of our losses and grief reactions over an extended period of time.
- Reminisce and share stories and memories—let your friend guide you. For example, “I have such a wonderful memory of your child. Would you like me to share it now or another time?”
- Stay away from “should’s”—for example “You should go out more, try to eat more (or less), go to your place of worship more, read this book, or come over for lunch.”
- Embrace the silence. The ability to just be present and quiet with your friend can be very comforting during times of sorrow.

Unfortunately, the “outside” world may return to its routines so quickly and at a far different pace than one to which most grieving parents can adjust. It is important for communities to create systems of support for the grieving parents and their families as they slowly reconnect with life around them in a changed way.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Caring Connections

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Partnership for Parents

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