

COMFORT ZONE CAMP

"A Fun and Safe Place for Grieving Children"



## THE SURVIVING PARENT

*By Comfort Zone Camp, 2009*

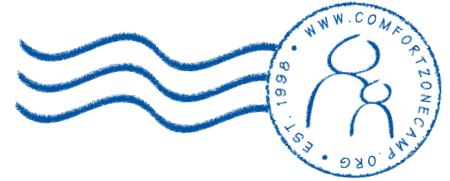
**As the surviving parent, you can proactively do the following things to help the family cope with their tragedy and grief:**

- Guide the family's grief journey – Make choices to help guide the family to grieve in healthy ways by seeking support systems and resources.
- Don't go it alone – Seek professional grief counseling for the entire family. In addition, seek grief support systems that are age appropriate for each member of the family, such as teen support groups or camps.
- Demonstrate positive coping skills – Children will take cues on how to grieve from you. If you talk and share memories about your loved one, they will feel good talking and sharing memories. Also, if you normalize crying as a way of coping or "letting it out," you let them know it is okay to do the same. On the flip side, if you never talk about your loved one, or demonstrate negative coping skills, children will do the same.
- Don't let the child fill an adult role – Children will try to protect you, which could lead to refusing to talk about the loss and their grief in an effort not to upset or hurt you.
- Reassure your children that things will be okay – Validate their feelings and try to help them feel their world is still safe. Try to make sense of the loss. Let them know that as a family, you will be okay.
- Reassure your children that their feelings are normal – There is no one way to grieve, and there are lots of feelings that come after the loss of a loved one. Look for opportunities for your children to meet peers who can help validate their feelings through support groups, camps, online forums, and/or books.
- Keep in mind your child's age – Children of different ages and developmental levels will have different grief understandings, reactions, and needs. Keep their age in mind when responding to their grief.
- Encourage your family to actively remember – Actively engage your children in remembering their loved one through conversations, mementoes, photos, journaling, private rituals, and recognizing special days.
- Don't expect the grieving period to have an end date – Grief does not have a timeline, such as six months or a year. Grief is a life-long journey that will have highs and lows. It will ebb and flow, and will often be triggered by life events.
- Recognize the impact of other life changes – Understand that changes, like moving to a new house and/or school, having the surviving parent return to work, or having new caretakers, may trigger secondary losses for the child. In addition, life events such as school dances, graduation, and weddings may trigger grief in the future.



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## CHILDREN GRIEVE DIFFERENTLY – COMMON REACTIONS

*By Comfort Zone Camp, 2009*

Children grieve differently than adults. Typically, you will not find a grieving child wearing all black and crying. A grieving child will look just like any other child. But even though their grief may not be as outwardly expressed, it does not mean they are not grieving.

While each child will react differently to loss based on personality and age, these are a few common signs to help recognize grief:

- Separation anxiety – Child becomes “clingy,” has trouble saying “good-bye” to loved ones, or fears leaving his or her parent(s), even for a short time.
- Regression – Child reverts to bed wetting or thumb sucking.
- Impatience – Child becomes overly frustrated and angered during the course of daily activities.
- Withdrawal – Child becomes unemotional, separates from his or her friends and family.
- Inattentive – Child has trouble focusing in school.
- Protectiveness – Child acts paternally towards his or her sibling(s).

At what age are children able to mourn? Grief author Alan Wolfelt said, “Any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn.” Below are a few more signs of grief broken out by age:

### **Preschool (2–4 years)**

- Sense of loss and sadness, but can’t comprehend death.
- May lack the vocabulary to express how they feel. Adults internalize feelings; children act them out.
- Heightened fear of separation (a normal stage) from loved one lost and loved ones living.
- Death isn’t seen as permanent.
- Very literal in their understanding (use care with abstract concepts such as heaven and “sleeping”).

### **Elementary School (5–9 years)**

- Experience the full range of emotions as any adult (sad, angry, guilty, lonely, etc.).
- Limited life exposure leaves little understanding of what’s happening.
- Often assume they were to blame in some way.
- Better understanding that death is final as they age up.
- Many worries about who will care for them and if other caretakers will also die, leaving them alone.

### **Middle School (10–13 years)**

- Experience the full range of emotions.
- Social dimension of death and its impact on family, friends, and school may emerge.
- If it is a parent loss, may want the parent to remarry or may resent a new person who, in their eyes, may take the place of the lost loved one.
- Good understanding that death is final.
- Many worries about caretakers.



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### High School (14–18 years)

- Experience the full range of emotions.
- Death has a social dimension with its impact on family, friends, school, etc.
- Death of same sex parent can be especially traumatic for some through this stage of finding their identity. May, however, resent a "new" person in the surviving parent's life.
- Often raise philosophical questions about the meaning of life (this age range is a time when kids feel most "immortal" and death is a painful reality).
- Exaggeration of normal adolescent behavior (moody, impulsive, risk taking, etc.).

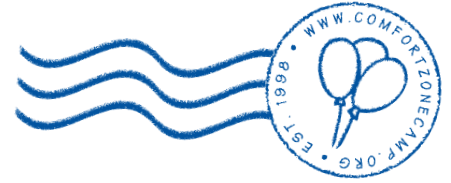
*Note:* Some children may have lost a loved one several years ago and are just now coping with feelings of not having a parent, grandparent, or sibling, as they move into a new growth stage.

Grief does not have an end date, such as six months or a year. Grief is a life-long journey that will have highs and lows. It will ebb and flow, and will often be triggered by life events such as moving, graduation, weddings, etc.



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## WHAT GRIEVING TEENS WANT PARENTS TO KNOW

*From Teens in Comfort Zone Camp Healing Circles<sup>SM</sup>, 2009*

- Don't say, "I know how you feel."
- Don't say, "Everything will be okay." Be honest.
- Don't say, "Your [insert person who died] would have wanted this." It instills guilt.
- Don't make us talk.
- Be considerate of our emotions.
- Don't pretend that the person who died was never here—help keep the memories alive.
- Explain your feelings and grief to us, too.
- Moving and changing schools means having to tell our story again to new people.
- Remember that we are still kids—try not to give us the duties of a parent.
- Get the details on health-related deaths to help prevent it in the rest of the family.
- Realize that every kid reacts differently, we're all individuals.
- Acknowledge the anniversary of their death, find something the family can do together.
- Don't force counseling—let us grieve on our own terms.
- Help us and our little brothers/sisters ease into life transitions—and be patient.
- Don't date or remarry just to try to replace the person who died.