

**WHAT TO DO:
HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS COPE
DURING A LOVED ONE'S TERMINAL ILLNESS**

3- to 5-year-olds

- Allow regular times such as breakfast or bedtime for children to ask questions about what they see happening. Give simple explanations. Be honest without being overly optimistic or pessimistic.
- Provide consistent substitute childcare when the well parent/caregiver is not able to be available.
- Maintain routines and schedules as much as possible.
- Allow planned, time-limited hospital visits. Prepare children for what they will see (IV lines, O₂, change in loved one's appearance).
- Understand children's need for play as a means of expression of feelings as well as a coping mechanism when things feel overwhelming.

6- to 8-year-olds

- Reassure children that the illness is not their fault. Children this age often blame themselves when bad things happen. Provide accurate information about the cause of the patient's illness.
- Children can be overwhelmed by an adult's strong display of anger or sadness. Controlled emotions are often most effective for discussing events with children.
- Communicate with children's teachers and other significant adults about the loved one's illness.
- Provide reassurance to children that the family will be able to get through this difficult time together.

9- to 12-year-olds

- Provide honest, detailed information about the loved one's diagnosis and decline as it occurs.
- Help children remain involved in after-school activities, sports, and contact with friends.
- Acknowledge with children the stress of living with uncertainty and provide reassurance about the strength of the family unit.
- Support children's desire to help with the patient's care, but don't allow children to be independently in charge of caregiving tasks.
- Encourage children to read, write, or draw about the disease and their own reactions if they indicate an interest.

13- to 18-year olds

- Involve teens when talking about their loved one's illness. They need to trust that adults will be open and truthful with them.
- Enlist the help of other caring adults to provide transportation as needed in order to allow the teen to continue participation in peer activities.
- Keep the school informed about serious illness in the family. Teachers and staff need to be supportive without drawing attention to the student.
- Allow teens to participate in the patient's care, being careful not to overwhelm him or her with too much responsibility.

(over)

**WHAT TO DO:
HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS COPE
AFTER A LOVED ONE'S TERMINAL ILLNESS**

3- to 5-year-olds

- Explain in concrete details the fact that when a person dies, all bodily functions stop and the person does not come back.
- Prepare children for what they will see and experience during rituals like funerals, memorials and wakes. Encourage – but do not force – participation.
- Assign a trusted adult to see to the children's needs and take them away from the activity if needed.
- Provide transitional objects or possessions of the deceased that seem important to children such as clothing, letters or a special gift.
- Expect some regressive behavior such as separation anxiety, sleeping problems or bedwetting, or a surge in clinging and crying behavior.

6- to 8-year-olds

- Understand that children's expressions of grief are often brief and episodic.
- Provide reassurance of your ability to love and care for your children despite your own grief.
- Inform the school of the death. Explore supportive services available to children if they become upset while at school, and tell children about these.
- At this age, children's regressive behavior may include stubbornness and "acting out" as well as sleeping problems and some anxiety about returning to school.

9- to 12-year-olds

- Invite children to participate in rituals, either directly or indirectly. They can write about the person who died or convey their views to other presenters at the rituals.
- Normalize children's concerns about returning to school and feeling "different" from their friends. Talk about the supports available to them in the school.
- Help children choose appropriate mementos that had belonged to the deceased.
- At this age, children may exhibit either emotional avoidance or emotional outbursts that are followed by feelings of embarrassment.

13- to 18-year olds

- Create an open environment for sharing and asking questions. Teens need to be able to express their thoughts and feelings about the death and have those feelings validated.
- For many teens, keeping clothing of the deceased, or having a significant item (a watch or other jewelry, sports equipment or trophies, tools) helps them "feel closer" to the person who died.
- Support a teen's choice to return to school soon after the death.
- Encourage the teen to draw support from the teen's peer group and other important adults such as teachers and relatives.

Adapted with permission, Christ GH and Christ AE. Current Approaches to Helping Children Cope with a Parent's Terminal Illness. CA Cancer J Clin 2006; 56; 197-212.

Prepared by PATHways Center for Grief & Loss, Hospice of Lancaster County

Street Address: 4075 Old Harrisburg Pike ♦ Mount Joy, PA 17552

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 4125 ♦ Lancaster, PA 17604-4125

Phone: (717) 391-2413 ♦ www.pathwaysthroughgrief.org ♦ Permission to copy required

