

ABC'S for Parents or Caregivers of a Grieving Child

If you are the parent or caregiver of a grieving child, adolescent or young adult, it's important for you to be prepared as much as possible for the journey ahead.

Can I fix this?

As much as you would like, you cannot "fix" this situation for the child nor can you "fix" the child. It's important to know that heartache and grief cannot, and should not, be avoided. Those grieving should enter the pain and experience it, in order to recover from it.

Won't my child grow out of this?

Grief in children can arise anytime throughout the different developmental stages of growth and even into adulthood. If that grief is suppressed it may only rear itself in a more negative and detrimental way later on. So the griever is encouraged to embrace the sorrow and allow it for a time.

Will this go on forever?

In the beginning, this grief journey may feel all-consuming to everyone involved; it may seem as if it will always be overwhelming. However, if the child is allowed to thoroughly experience the loss, the grief will lose its dominance, then eventually decrease its force and take its place in the background.

The following ABC's are guidelines to parents and/or caregivers; but they are only suggestions because every grieving situation and every griever is different.

- A Allow the grief
- B Be comforting
- C Communication and Connection
- D Don't assume
- E Empathize
- F Freedom of expression
- G Grieve together
- H Help with identity crisis
- I Include the child
- J Just love

K	Keep fun alive
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M	Mood swings
N	Never give up
O	Observe disturbing behavior
P	Patience
Q	Questions answered
R	Regular routines
S	Spiritual matters
T	Trustworthy
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V	Validate feelings
W	Withdrawal
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Z	Zest for the future

A Allow the grief: Allow young people to express their grief in their own way and in their own time. A child's grief can be more intense or drawn out than an adult's. This may be difficult for caregivers because of the desire to protect children from anything painful. Resist the temptation to shield them from the hurt and pain; a child's grief must be allowed.

B Be comforting: Ensure the griever you are there to take care of him. Use affection and kindness while consoling him as best you can. Reassure the child and give him hope. Be a good listener and ask how he would like to be comforted. Find out what makes him feel safe and what eases his pain.

C Communication and Connection: It is extremely important to keep the lines of communication open and stay connected to the child. Grieving can bring isolation, which can be a lonely and desolate place for a young person. Don't separate from a hurting child; stay connected to her even though you may be grieving yourself.

Be aware of what she is feeling and what is going on in her life. What is she doing? How is she processing the loss? What is she feeling? Is she communicating or expressing her feelings? Help children put their feelings into words. Make yourself available for positive communication and a true connection.

Don't just ask questions in passing; look at the child, giving your full attention and connecting with what you hear. Listen to what is said, even if it is uncomfortable.

Never force someone to talk, only encourage communication. Assure the griever you will be available to listen if you are needed.

Sometimes communication and connection can be made with absolutely no words. There are times when words just don't seem appropriate. However, you can still connect with a hug, pat on the back or a smile and communicate that you care and that she is valued.

D Don't assume: Every person and every grieving situation is different, so don't assume you know how the griever feels, and don't assume you know exactly what the griever needs. Each person's needs are different, especially those of children and young adults, so ask the child what his needs are instead of assuming.

E Empathize: Respond to the child with genuine concern and empathy. Recognize and, if you can, share her emotions. Always use compassion while talking and listening. Be sensitive to the feelings behind her words and actions. Help the griever through the journey with love and understanding.

F Freedom of expression: Accept the young griever unconditionally and support him as he expresses himself freely. Allow expression of emotions within boundaries so he doesn't hurt himself or others. This may be uncomfortable to see at times, but assure him that you will remain by his side. Young people, especially children, tend to express their grief in behavior. Be attentive that words may not always come easily for some grievers, and expression of feelings may be exhibited in other ways.

G Grieve together: Be careful not to isolate. Sometimes young grievers are alienated because they are being sheltered or it is assumed they are too young to understand. When death and tragedy strikes, even adults don't understand. So, allow young people to be a part of the family's grieving process.

H Help with identity crisis: Help maintain and develop the child's identity after the loss, especially in older children. The previous identity of the child may have been compromised and the roles may now be confused. A young girl may have felt pride in being "daddy's little girl", but after the loss of her father may feel that she no longer has that title. A young boy could have enjoyed being called the "little man" of the family, but after the death of a parent, separation, or divorce, he may feel he should be the "big man" now. Children can feel bewildered about all of the changes, their place in the family and what is expected of them. Because they may feel or think differently now, they could have a feeling of not knowing who they are anymore. Offer guidance and assurance while helping them redefine their roles and rediscover who they are.

I Include the child: Include the child in grief, future plans, and decisions where possible. Allow him to cry with you, have an input in the funeral preparations, or suggest plans to move forward in the situation. Try not to keep him away from family discussions. Communicate necessary information to the young griever. He needs to participate in the family loss and should not be left out. Also, share with the griever in the confrontation of pain and the process of recovery.

J Just love: When overwhelmed or confused, simply remember to love the child. As a parent or caregiver, you may become confused or even overwhelmed in your own grief. In those instances, just love. Don't worry about saying the right thing or having the correct response; it's more important that you show genuine love.

K Keep fun alive: Try to create opportunities for recreation, play, and laughter. This sounds impossible but is very important to the grieving child. Fun was a major part of the child's life prior to the loss, and it is important for her to engage in recreation as soon as she wants and feels able to. Encourage her to participate in creative expressions of her feelings. Fun is a part of "normalcy" and can be a vital part of recovery.

L Live each day: It is essential to demonstrate the importance of living life to the fullest. Live in the moment of each day and teach the child the value of life and our time here. Even though there will be painful times ahead, let the griever know that you can still find joy each day and appreciate the time you do have.

M Mood swings: Emotions and behaviors can be very volatile during this overwhelming time. It is not uncommon for young grievers to experience learning problems and trouble in school or social situations, even if they never have before.

Grief can bring difficulty in concentrating and paying attention, lack of focus, preoccupation with worry and loss, regression in behavior, shock, anger, isolation, confusion, depression, sleeping problems, physical symptoms, denial and guilt. The rush of these feelings and reactions can create mood swings at any time.

Allow your young person to talk freely about his feelings when he's having a bad time or worried, instead of acting out in bad behavior or withdrawal.

N Never give up: Never give up on a child and her ability to progress in the grief journey. Encourage her often and continually offer hope. It is vital that you never surrender in your journey so you can teach her about perseverance and pressing through the very difficult times.

O Observe disturbing behavior: It is crucial to recognize painful feelings and disturbing behaviors. Aggression, extreme withdrawal, depression, and suicidal thoughts are all behaviors that require immediate attention.

If disturbing words, thoughts or actions are causing concern, then notify the appropriate helping professionals and authority*. The child's safety is the utmost concern.

Do not hesitate in reporting alarming conduct. You must define the "fine line" of what is allowed and appropriate; your judgment and discernment is essential. Seek professional help when in doubt about unsettling behaviors.

**If a child is in immediate danger, dial 911 for help. Otherwise, a list of helpful numbers and hotlines has been provided in the resources section of this book.*

P Patience: Be patient with a griever. He may exhibit behavior contrary to what you are used to seeing from him. He may not act as he normally would, or he may say unusual things. He may become more quiet and withdrawn or may act out his confusion and pain. Reassure him of your support and love. Don't rush the grief process, because healing occurs at different rates. It is his journey, and you can best help him by demonstrating patience.

Q Questions answered: Answer a young person's questions honestly and age-appropriately. Talk openly and avoid using confusing words like "sleeping" or "gone away" when talking about death. Use straightforward terminology, but in terms she can understand. Be simplistic and factual when explaining the loss and details of the situation. Evading questions and creating secrecy can be even more disturbing and unsettling to the child. A direct but sensitive answer is usually best.

R Regular routines: Make an effort to keep as many routines as regular as possible. A consistent and structured environment can be very soothing and reassuring to a child in chaos. It is important to simplify your schedules and not overload the child, while trying to keep as much normalcy in his routine as you can.

S Spiritual matters: Spiritual concerns often arise during tragedy and loss. Share with young grievers reassuring beliefs of hope and the love of Jesus Christ, the Savior. Read

Scriptures to children daily, or provide the older ones with a Bible they can read on their own. *The Holy Bible* is a source of encouragement, and reading the printed Word can give supernatural strength to the mourning. Words of life can soothe the aching soul and comfort those who read them. Also, encourage grieving children to pray and talk to God on their own.

T Trustworthy: Show grievers of all ages that you can be trusted to tell the truth. Be honest with your children. Young people are very intuitive and can sense when you're not telling the truth.

Demonstrate what you can about your feelings or details of situations. Share what you are feeling, good or bad, as needed, but be appropriate and use discernment in what you reveal.

Encourage the young griever to be truthful about her feelings and not just say what she thinks you want to hear. Be respectful and let her know you can be trusted with what she tells you.

U Unfair or Unrealistic expectations:

Unfair expectations of a child can slow progress and create further setbacks. Sometimes it is insinuated, or children may feel, it is their responsibility to take on duties that are beyond their capabilities. Don't expect or allow your young person to take on inappropriate roles. Let him comfort others without assuming a "caregiver" role.

Also, don't have unrealistic expectations for the child's grief journey. Don't expect brief turmoil followed by a quick recovery. The duration of grief and the reaction to grief differs with each individual. The grief of any child is not like exactly yours, or others'; there's no "textbook" grief journey.

V Validate feelings: Listen to how the grieving child feels and let him know it's normal to feel the way he does. It is a very confusing time, and he may feel abnormal or out of control.

Let him know that grief is normal and that reactions to it can differ. Confirm his thoughts by letting him know you share some of the same ones.

W Withdrawal: Withdrawal may compound feelings of isolation and loss. Encourage the griever to communicate when feeling isolated. Some people may not want to share their feelings during this time, so let her know you are there to support her. Maybe a quiet hug or just your presence is needed. Be observant for signs that withdrawal might develop into a situation of concern.

X eXpect the uneXpected: The journey through grief is not mapped out; anything can happen or be said at anytime. Be prepared for out-of-control emotions, unusual feelings,

strange actions and abnormal behavior. Grief is an intense feeling of pain that can be unpredictable. Being overwhelmed with so many confusing emotions can lead to thoughts and behaviors you never expected.

Y You are important: The young griever needs you and your love to help him through the difficult times. Your support is priceless. Take care of yourself and make sure your own needs are met. You are valuable, so treat yourself with love and kindness.

Z Zest for the future: Be enthusiastic for the future and the “new normal” that is to be created. Even though the pain may be dominant now, let children know there is expectation for a joyful life ahead. Encourage young grievers and fill them with hope that they will progress and feel better someday. Give them confidence to trust themselves and God for a happy and exciting future.