



Children, Grief, and the Holidays: How You Can Help

By Pamela Gabbay, M.A., FT

The holiday season is painful for adults after the death of a loved one, but it can be even more isolating and distressing for children if they are not given ample guidance from the adults in their lives. Here are some suggestions for how to help your children during the holidays:

1. Suppress the urge to ignore the holidays because they seem too painful to endure. It's important that children are given the opportunity to celebrate the holidays without feeling bad or feeling guilty. After all, they still have a need to "just be a kid," especially during the holidays.
2. Discuss the painful feelings that might arise during the holiday season. Children are flooded with memories from the past and they want everything to go back to the way it was before. Help normalize these feelings for your children by allowing them to openly talk about their feelings. As a parent, you might explain that you've been feeling that way, too.
3. Together, as a family, create new holiday traditions. When creating these new rituals, ask your children what they want. Their input is extremely important. If you have more than one child, get all of their opinions. Then, as a group, decide the best way to spend the holidays.
4. Include the memory of your loved one in your celebration. Encourage your children to make something meaningful, such as a holiday card or special gift, specifically for your loved one. Decide as a family where these items should be placed during the holidays. Your children might want to place them under the tree, on the fireplace mantle, or in their room. Some children might want to take these items to the cemetery.
5. Spend time together reflecting back on special holiday memories from the past. Have your children draw a picture of their favorite holiday memory. Give them the opportunity to talk about their drawing, if they choose to.
6. Light a candle in memory of your loved one. If you have more than one child, allow each child to have his or her own special candle. Consider creating a place of honor for the candles in your home.

7. Together, make a holiday ornament in memory of the person who died. Or, consider an ongoing ritual of purchasing an ornament each year in their memory. This ornament could represent anything your loved one held dear.
8. If the person who died had any favorite holiday songs, play these songs with your children and reflect back on meaningful times that you had together while listening to these songs.
9. Plan a special remembrance meal together. Help your children bake a favorite holiday dish or dessert of the person who died. If you have more than one child, offer each child the opportunity to make a favorite dish.
10. As a family, consider volunteering your time to a charity in need during the holidays. Often, giving back to others who are also hurting can be very beneficial to grieving children.
11. Donate toys to a charity that helps children. Have your children help you choose and purchase the toys and then wrap them together. Include your children in the delivery of the toys.
12. Attend a holiday memorial celebration as a family. Many communities hold candle lighting events during the holidays. This provides an opportunity for you and your children to honor the memory of your loved one in a community setting. Check with your local hospice to see if they have an upcoming event this holiday season.

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