

Supporting Grieving Children During the Holidays

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Holidays can be a challenging time for anyone who has experienced a loss, and children are no exception. We hope we can provide some simple guidance on how to support the youth in your lives during the upcoming holiday season. Here are some suggestions to help ease your stress:

- **Anticipate an increase in sadness, irritability, and waves of grief for bereaved children during the holidays.** Do your best to accept their feelings and model healthy ways of expressing them. Stating, “It’s OK to miss Dad. I miss him too” is a beautiful way to do that.
- **Invite children and teens to talk about their feelings, but don’t force conversation.** Consider setting aside time to intentionally talk about and remember your loved one. Tell everyone in advance this is the plan so no one feels blindsided. You may want to look through old pictures together to invite in memories. If children and teens need time to just listen, respect their need to be quiet.
- **Make space for emotional expression in a way that suits the child(ren).** You may encourage drawing, journaling, making memorial ornaments, decorating an altar candle, singing, playing a musical instrument, or engaging in physical exercise depending on what the child is interested in. Teens may enjoy making collages from old magazines and may be interested in sharing their experience with you afterwards.
- **Include children in planning for the holidays.** Decide together what traditions you think you’re interested in keeping and what may be too painful and need to be let go this year. What parties or gatherings would you like to attend and what will you skip?
- **Get more rest as a family than you think you need.** Grief is hard work, and the holidays can be overwhelming. Children are often overstimulated with the business of the holiday season, the sweet treats, the bright lights, potent smells, and constant sounds.
- **Do something as a family that makes you happy.** Discuss what may lift your spirits. Is it volunteering together? Picking out toys for a toy drive? Going to see a holiday movie? Staying in and playing a game together?
- **Be gentle with yourself and get support from others when you need it.** Taking care of grieving children when you are grieving yourself is unimaginably exhausting. Remember that you are doing the best you can.

- **Pay attention to a child’s cues and remember that they may not grieve or mourn in the same way as adults do.** Kids dip into and out of grief much more quickly than we do as adults and it often may not even seem like they are grieving. This too can be normal.
 - Refer to our “Helping Children Cope” handbook on our Resources page to learn about how children understand death and loss at various developmental stages.
 - **Be flexible – with the children and with yourself.** We may not feel up for the plans we made together. Check in with one another about what you need at any given moment.
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For more information about how to support yourself during the holidays, please see our “Coping with Grief and Loss during the Holidays” article written by the Bereavement Services Manager, Deborah Schwing, LMFT, LPCC posted on our Grief Support Resources page.

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American Canyon, Napa and Vallejo: (707) 931.7299**

By the Bay Health is a 501(c)(3), non-profit, health care organization serving the Bay Area since 1975, with the goal of providing the highest quality end-of-life care to patients and support to their families. Its grief-counseling program for community members serves those who reside in By the Bay Health’s service areas whose life has been affected by the loss of a loved one.