



Alcohol, Drug Addiction & Mental Health Services Board of Erie County

Helping Children Cope with Loss

The loss of a parent or any significant person in a child's life can affect the child in different ways.

When explaining that someone has passed, it is important to use clear, simple language. The age/cognitive development of the child can elicit a range of potential responses as the child processes the information.

Firelands Counseling & Recovery Services' Senior Director encourages caregivers to validate a range of emotions and prepare the child for next steps. Explaining a funeral, burial, etc. can help the child cope with the forthcoming rituals.

The loss of a parent is particularly challenging for children around holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries tied to that loss. These times tend to be heavily focused on family, so it can be hard to not have a parent present. OhioGuidestone's Director of Community Counseling in Lorain and Erie Counties said, "children respond differently to grief. Some may act out, others may withdraw, and some will have more obvious symptoms such as being sad and tearful."

Nicole added, "We encourage clients to talk about and show their grief. Working through loss is about expressing and identifying feelings and creating new traditions- not forgetting."

You do not need to be a professional to help a child who has lost a parent. Nicole believes kindness, love, and a sympathetic ear are the only tools that you will need.

She suggests approaching the child in a supportive manner, validating their feelings, and listening. "Remember that behaviors have meaning, and underneath the behaviors, the child is trying to express a feeling and that feeling most likely is grief," Nicole said.

A child's age plays a significant factor in their coping skills. A variety of age-related grief and loss materials are available online under Children's Mental Health resources. Sesame Street is also a great resource for young children.

Firelands uses play therapy to help young children process emotions pertaining to grief and other mental health problems.

For elementary age children, you can help them create a memory box of the parent, or any loved one they have lost, and start new traditions to celebrate that person and keep their memory alive. A special candle at a holiday party can also represent a loved one who has passed.

For middle schoolers and teens, new traditions can include journaling to preserve the memories they have and recording new memories of happy times.

Developing rituals around life changing transitions will help children of any age, and adults as well.

The OhioGuidestone staff work as a team to help clients heal from loss. When a young client lost multiple family members, the team shared the grief and helped their client create a celebration of

each life lost.

Around the anniversary of a death, the staff at OhioGuidestone has helped families have a birthday party for the person they lost, making a cake, and buying gifts to put at the headstone.

For anyone trying to help a child cope with loss, Nicole says to remember that grief is not linear, and that grief triggers can be unexpected. "You just need to be supportive in the moments they need you and encourage professional help."

When children continue to struggle with grief, in a manner that affects their daily living, consider a support group and/or counseling services. OhioGuidestone and Firelands both have clinicians who specialize in trauma-informed care, with professional staff trained to work specifically with children who have lost a parent or are dealing with any form of grief and loss.

Firelands also has a Board-Certified Child Psychiatrist who sees youth in Erie County and can assist our clients if symptoms require treatment in addition to our counseling services. Firelands also operates a crisis support line, available every day from 8 a.m. – midnight, by calling 567-867-HOPE (4673).

Treatment services and Hope Line are funded, in part, by the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Erie County.