

How to Help Your Grieving Child

Dealing with your own grief is difficult enough over the holidays, but you may also be responsible for children who are grieving. We encourage you to seek help from relatives, family friends, church leaders, and others who can help your children through the difficulties of the holiday season. Our Surviving the Holidays experts share wise and practical advice for you and for the people you've asked to come alongside your children and help.

Q: What are some typical concerns parents have about how their children will react during the holidays after the loss of a loved one?

Linda Ranson Jacobs: Many parents worry about the sadness the child may feel, and they may want to try and keep up a happy face for the child so the child doesn't feel sadness during the holidays. That's a mistake. The child needs to feel the sadness during the holidays just like the parent does. It's a great time for the parent and child to share an emotion during the holidays.

Lois Rabey: The thing I worried about the most was that the children would suffer and that the things that had been so positive would now become a negative. I had to think ahead: "What can I do to make the holidays special now that my husband's gone, because they're going to experience the loss in a deeper way during the holidays than they do during the rest of the year?"

I talked to them before the holiday season began. I said, "We're coming into a holiday season, and the ads we see on TV are going to be about families and kids giving presents to their parents. We don't have that this year, but we're going to go ahead and do the best that we can and celebrate what the season's about even though Daddy's gone. He would want us to do that. We're also going to have new traditions, and it will be okay. This may feel different. There may be things that happen that you're going to feel sad about. Come home and we'll talk about it, and we'll work through it, and with time it will get better."

Q: Why is it important to keep some of the same routines for children during the holidays?

Linda Ranson Jacobs: Many times during the holidays as parents we want to protect our children, so we try to make everything different, and sometimes that's a mistake. Sometimes it's okay to keep things the same. Children feel security in routines and traditions, so sit down, talk to the children, and ask them what they want to change, but let them know you still want to keep some things the same. Go with the flow of what your children want to do. And any change you make, you need to feel comfortable with because if you don't feel comfortable, that's going to impact the children as well.

Q: How do you determine which holiday traditions to keep and which to let go?

Laura Petherbridge: Determining which holiday traditions to hold on to and which to let go of is an individual decision. The thing you hold on to this year may be something you let go of next year, and it may fluctuate from year to year. The first one or two Christmases are the ones that are going to be the most difficult to determine because there will be moments when you'll think, "If we don't do that particular thing, will that be tarnishing the memory of my lost loved one, or will make that my children think it's not important anymore?" The greater thing is to focus on relationships more than traditions and to give yourself permission to say, "This year it's okay if we don't do that particular tradition." If it's a thing that is going to trigger your emotions more than others, then maybe it would better for you to let go of that this year. Being with your children and making sure you're staying as emotionally healthy as you can is much more important than holding on to particular traditions.

Lois Rabey: It's important to communicate what you're changing with your children. Sometimes children will feel like they're being disloyal to the person who passed away: "We always did it this way when Daddy was alive." It's important for the children to know you're not being disloyal to the person who passed away when you try new traditions. Even if that person had lived, he or she may have wanted to try something different too, and you can communicate that to the children.

You can also say, "It's never going to feel again like it felt when Daddy was alive, but we're going to have a new normal and that's going to become what we build the future on. It's what we're going to be from now on, with God's help, and we're going to be blessed. Pain will be there, and it's going to be different than it was when Daddy was alive, but we're still going to have a full life and be blessed."

Q: Why is it important for parents to take into account their child's personality style when considering how they're going to approach the holidays?

Lois Rabey: An individual's personality style really impacts how that person handles a particular situation. What I recognized about myself is that as an extrovert, I'm energized by people, by being at a party or talking to people. That wears out introverts, and if they don't have the time to regroup and to build their energy back up, they're going to get run down. They're not going to be able to cope as well. For me, if I'm isolated too much, I actually get worn out from that. It's important that parents not only recognize their children's personalities but also their own.

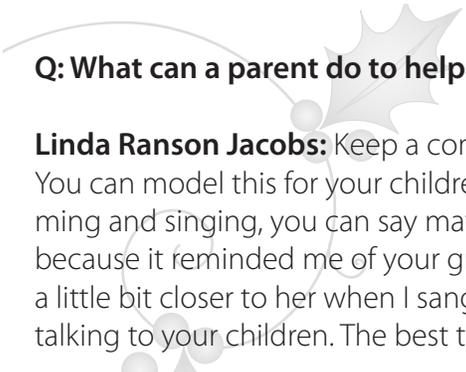
Because my personality is extroverted, I was accepting whatever invitation I could, and my two daughters and I were doing a lot. Of my two daughters, one's an extrovert and one's an introvert, but back then I wasn't really aware of that. So my extroverted daughter was just fine; she was with me. My introverted daughter would get kind of quiet. If I were doing something different now, I would have more of a balance for her benefit because I think she got a little worn out. She was okay, but it took me a while to realize that she needed more downtime. Under normal circumstances she needed more downtime, so she certainly needed more downtime over the holidays and with the death of her father happening at the same time. She needed more of a balance.

Q: What emotions do grieving children struggle with during the holiday season?

Linda Ranson Jacobs: Many children after the death of a loved one will take on some guilt feelings, such as, "Why couldn't I have done more to keep my loved one alive? Why, God, didn't You heal him? Why, doctors, didn't you give her a better medicine?" The guilt they feel many times turns to anger because the children don't know what to do with this feeling, so it's easy to get angry. Most children can identify the feeling of anger, but many times the anger then turns to sadness. Parents need to be aware of this cycle of emotions, and they should also understand the children may not share their emotions with the parent because they may feel bad and don't want to hurt their parent. It can be helpful for a relative, a close family friend, a youth/children's minister, etc., to talk to the children about their guilt, anger, and sadness and to help them identify their feelings.

Laura Petherbridge: Children process things differently than adults do. Children aren't going to tell you they're upset about something because often they don't know how to communicate that. It may come out in their behavior. Children may start acting differently around the holiday times. They may start becoming more angry or more aggressive, or more sullen and more depressed. Be looking for changes in behavior around the holidays either because they're missing the person who's no longer in the family and/or because they're already thinking, "This holiday is going to be different; this is not something I'm going to enjoy."

Linda Ranson Jacobs: Children don't grieve twenty-four hours a day. They have to take breaks in their grieving process. Many times when they're feeling joy or happiness, they actually feel guilty for feeling joy and happiness, especially if the parent is still sad. Parents need to be very careful when talking to their children and let them know it's okay to be happy; it's okay to feel that joy during the holidays.



Q: What can a parent do to help his or her children share their feelings?

Linda Ranson Jacobs: Keep a continual dialogue going with your children and help them label their feelings. You can model this for your children. For example, if you go to a Christmas concert, and you come home humming and singing, you can say matter-of-factly, "Remember that song they sang? That really touched my heart because it reminded me of your grandmother. She was always singing and humming at Christmastime. I just felt a little bit closer to her when I sang that song, so I wanted to share that with you." Keep labeling your feelings and talking to your children. The best thing you can do is model appropriate behaviors and feelings for your children.

Q: What do you think about the phrase, "Now you have to be both mother and father to your children"?

Lois Rabey: There's a phrase that's often said: "Now I have to be both mother and father to my children." I had to recognize that I can't be anybody's father. I can only be the mother. For instance, if we're going to have a live Christmas tree and I can't set it up, then I have to get someone to set it up, or we don't have a live tree. It's that simple. It may not be physical weakness, but it's just a reality that I can't do it all.



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