



**The Grieving Child**  
**Helen Fitzgerald**

## When a Parent Dies

Debbie Jospin's account of her husband's death, and of the way she broke this terrible news to her young children, highlights many of the tough decisions that face a parent when a tragedy like this occurs. Fortunately, Debbie had a lot of common sense and made a whole series of good decisions quickly. I wish that every parent faced with such questions would have Debbie's story to turn to. It's a wonderful case history with a powerful lesson for other parents.

What are the issues facing parents when there is a death in the family?

- Do children really grieve, or do these things just wash over them?
- When the news is grim, should children be told? Wouldn't it be better to gloss it over, saying, for example, that Daddy will be gone for a while? Maybe they will forget him in time, or you could tell them some years from now when they're older.
- Should children attend the funeral? Wouldn't it be better to leave them with a baby sitter? Why do they need all these tears?
- Should children attend the burial service? Isn't this too much for a young mind to absorb?
- If the parent or parents are traumatized with their own losses, how can we expect them to think about the needs of their children? Can't this wait?

As recently as twenty years ago there was still debate in this country about the ability of children to grieve, as though this were a peculiarly adult reaction. We now know that even very young children, pre-schoolers, are able to understand the meaning of death and to express their often strong feelings of sorrow, anger, guilt, and fear--emotions that, suppressed, could lead to future problems. What applies to the youngest obviously applies to older children, as well. Clearly, grief does not wash over them. Like adults, they have a grief process to go through.

There can hardly be a more difficult task than telling a child that a parent has died. Children are dependent on their parents for everything that is important to them--food, shelter, love, and identity. When a parent dies, all of that can change. It is natural to want to protect a child from the harsh truth that a parent has died. The temptation to sugar-coat the truth is a powerful one.

I had a mother come to me one day to ask me how she might, at last, tell her children that their father would not be returning from that trip she had told them about when he had died months before. I gave her some suggestions, but just think what that revelation was going to do to that mother's credibility with her own children. How can you recover from that?

Nothing is more important than trust between parent and child. Lying, even when it is well intentioned, undermines that. With this in mind you have to know that telling your children something that they eventually will discover is untrue would be a mistake. And you would be surprised how children can stumble on the truth--from neighborhood gossip, classmates, even old newspaper clippings lying around the house. This doesn't mean that you have to be brutal in your approach to the facts, but whatever you say has to be the truth. I think Debbie approached the problem about as well as one could hope for.

Should children be taken to funerals? There is no hard and fast rule, but generally it is a good idea to try to include children in these extremely important events that will forever be remembered as part of a family's history. Also, children need convincing evidence that death has occurred or their fantasies are likely to persuade them that Daddy will walk in the door any minute. Attending the funeral will help head off those fantasies. Furthermore, after having to deal with the loss of a father, the ritual of the funeral itself may be somewhat reassuring with so many friends and relatives present.

Some parents I know have even had a separate service just for their children and their children's friends. Such a service can give children a chance to express their own grief by deciding what poems to read, songs to sing, and words to say. When it's over they will have

the memory of having done something nice for the parent, grandparent, or sibling who died.

In all of this, however, parents should approach these decisions based on what their children want to do. As good as it can be for children to attend family funerals it is not good for them to be forced to attend. They should be given as much information as they need about what will happen there, but the choice should be theirs.

Also, they should not be forced to do anything they are not comfortable doing--like kissing the cheek of their dead parent.

Should children attend burial services? Again, there is no hard and fast rule. Debbie obviously had reservations about her children watching the casket be lowered into the ground, and yet the intermediate step--showing them the empty cemetery plot where their father would soon rest--comforted them all. I am sure that in future years her children will appreciate having been there.

Having the responsibilities of parenthood is never more challenging than when a death occurs in the family--particularly the death of the other parent. Attending to the needs of the children at a time when one's own grief is compelling may seem beyond one's ability. Yet Debbie proved that a grieving spouse can also be a loving and thoughtful parent.

At the time of a family tragedy loving parents like Debbie will see that their children's needs are met, even when they themselves are torn with anguish. After all, sharing a tragedy with one's children can be one of the most bonding experiences of one's life--a way to convert tragedy into something life-fulfilling.

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*Do you have comments about this column, or questions you would like Helen to address in future columns? While Helen cannot respond personally to each message, she will select representative questions to answer in her weekly column. Send an email to: [fitzgerald@staff.beliefnet.com](mailto:fitzgerald@staff.beliefnet.com)*

Helen Fitzgerald is a renowned educator and writer on death and dying. She will be writing a column for Beliefnet on the grief of children and teens.