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A Child's Grief

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How well a child copes with the grief of losing a parent seems to be governed primarily by two things: how well the surviving parent copes and maintaining the child's routine.

“Children need consistency and reliability in the face of a loss,” explains family therapist Peter Willig, LMFT, director of operations and marketing for the Children's Bereavement Center in South Miami, Florida.

Bundled into that is the challenge of recognizing and navigating secondary losses. When a parent dies, the roles of surviving family members and friends will inevitably shift. The remaining parent may have to work more (or less) to compensate for the loss. Work, school, schedules, even household location and social circles can skew off their beaten track. “Those are secondary losses that we don't often attend to in the eyes of kids,” says Willig.

It's also critical to remember that children re-grieve as they grow older. A child may rework their grief at major milestones, such as birthdays or graduations, and as they deal with adolescence and their evolving independence, finding a partner, and raising a family. “Grief in the life of a child is an ongoing phenomenon,” says Willig.

Tragic as it is, the loss of a parent does not necessarily lead to problems later. “Every child grieves differently,” Willig explains. Be careful not to superimpose adult notions of proper mourning, and while some kind of formal grief support may help, it also may not be necessary. What parents should be watching for is how well their children are coping with life. “Just because a child is quiet in the face of a loss doesn't mean they're not grieving.”

For more information, the National Cancer Institute has a comprehensive overview at www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/Patient/page9, and Cancer.Net offers age-appropriate information at www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Grief+and+Bereavement. The Children's Bereavement Center has a long reading list, available at www.childbereavement.org under the “Resources” section.