

A guide to help and understand children surviving after a homicide



Unlocking a better future for families and friends of victims of homicide

Show them its ok to be sad, angry, cry or laugh. This can help them to express their own feelings.

- Suggest ways of expressing their grief through drawing, painting, writing, stories, music, a diary etc.
- Suggest counselling if children are not coping or encourage them to talk to someone outside of the family.
- Try not to be overprotective or spoil children to compensate for their loss.
- Be aware of children's feelings of guilt.
- Try to keep to family routines to help children feel secure spend time together to give children confidence that you are still a family even though some things have changed forever.
- Don't let children take on too much responsibility – they need support too.
- Communication is most important especially with teenagers even when they become rebellious and demanding.
- Provide a safe environment for discussions, perhaps using a few prompts such as photos or belongings.
- Information may need to be repeated many times. Correct misconceptions and provide accurate explanations.
- Some children need to use energy to get their feelings out, for example, through sport, hammering, punching bags or perhaps gardening.
- Encourage children to join the family in visiting the cemetery, picking flowers, lighting candles, contributing to a memorial fund or any other ritual especially for birthdays, anniversaries or other special days.

you to reassure them, hug them, hold them and most of all love them. Help them accept that it will take a long time to rebuild a new life and try not to let others put pressure on them to get on with their life.

Encourage someone close to the child or family to be there for them when parents are too overburdened with grief to cope. Reassure them that they will cope.

For more information

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Government of South Australia
Attorney-General's Department



Government
of South Australia
Attorney-General's
Department



Homicide Victims
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The most important thing in a child's life is family and security. When someone in their family is murdered their feelings of security and confidence are shattered.

Children depend on parents for many things and their reactions can often depend on how family and friends around them cope. Children mostly understand more than they are given credit for. Don't underestimate their feelings and needs, even when they are quite young. Their age can influence their reactions and sometimes children appear to be coping because they mask their real feelings or don't talk about them.

Homicide is quite different from other death. It causes more fear and anger and these reactions can be quite frightening for children. Due to the sudden nature and shocking circumstances the grieving process is often much longer and more intense and this may cause further problems for children as well as adults.

Physical reactions often show themselves in children especially when they find it hard to express themselves. Children in general need a great deal of understanding and support for many years especially as they grow up and slowly learn more about the circumstances of the homicide.

The general understanding of children depends on their age:

- Children up to two may not understand that they cannot see their loved one again.
- Children three to five years think death is temporary.
- Children six to ten years understand the reality of death but are curious about biological aspects and burial/funerals.
- Children eleven years plus have similar understanding as an adult.

How do children react?

- Children can suffer nightmares, dreams, fears, insecurity, bed wetting, aggressive behaviour or become very clingy or listless.
- Children can suffer headaches, tummy aches, grizzliness, irritability and anger.
- Children fear abandonment; they feel unsafe and worried that other people they love may go away.
- Children may become withdrawn and depressed.
- Children may revert to behaviour they had outgrown.
- Children sometimes show their grief through play or drawings and can only accept the concept of grief a little at a time.
- Children hate the idea of being 'different'.
- Children find it hard to concentrate and cope at school and sometimes change their friends or interests.
- Children sometimes feel rejected when parents are caught up in their own grief and can suppress their grief to save causing further pain.
- A change in order of family when a sibling dies is often disturbing for children.
- Older children and teenagers may become reckless out of frustration, drive too fast, hit out at others or experiment with sex, or alcohol/other drugs to help them cope.



How can you help?

- Children need plenty of care, encouragement and support just like adults.
- Children need sufficient time to re-establish their lives. Encourage them to be patient and give themselves time to readjust and come to terms with their loss.
- Listen carefully and observe children to gauge their reactions and understanding of the situation.
- Answer their questions honestly and acknowledge their feelings of loss.
- Explain the facts at a level they can understand. This may have to be revisited as they grow up. Don't tell fairy stories or half-truths as this may cause them further hurt when they learn the truth.
- Explain to them they are not responsible or to blame for the death.
- Be patient as children's reactions are often different from adults' but they need a sense of security and belonging when their lives are out of control.
- Encourage questions, explain how adults feel and supply books, videos or information to help them understand.
- Let the school/day care know about the loss of their loved one.
- Encourage children to attend the funeral and viewing, let them be involved in prayers, readings and flowers. They need to say goodbye.
- Don't isolate them or separate them from the family – they need to feel secure and share with the family.
- Don't tell them how they should act; for example, "be brave", "don't cry", and "look after mum/dad".
- Mention the name of the person who was killed so they know that it is alright to talk about them.
- Let children share in clothes or belongings if they wish to have something to keep.
- Don't be afraid to show emotion in front of them.