

Parenting During Stress and Loss

1. **Accept and respect the feelings of your children.** Stress and grief often bring a wide variety of feelings including sadness, anger, loneliness, and confusion. Some feelings may be difficult to understand, such as relief, ambivalence, jealousy, and guilt, but these feelings are usually a normal part of the process.
2. **Remember that children think and grieve differently than adults.** Try to have expectations that take your child's developmental level, life experience, and maturity into account, and expect the behaviors of a child not an adult.
3. **Express your own feelings openly and appropriately.** When you model healthy behaviors, children will follow your example. It is healthy to express yourself appropriately.
4. **Communicate openly and honestly. Never lie.** Children will believe what they are told, and lies can cause a lot more damage in the long run than the truth, told simply and with sensitivity to a child's ability to understand. When details and facts are omitted, children will make assumptions based on their limited understanding of the world. These assumptions are often far from the truth and can have long lasting unhealthy consequences.
5. **Answer all of your children's questions and concerns with honest, simple answers.** Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know" when it is the truth. Children will ask what they need to know when they need to know it. Providing honest facts will instill trust and security that may help children cope with an otherwise insecure or unpredictable situation.
6. **Allow your children to express feelings in their own ways and at their own pace.** Encourage, but don't pressure, children to share on an ongoing basis, for as long as it takes. Allow for many kinds of expressions, including verbal, written, art, and play.
7. **Maintain routines and consistency as much as possible.** This will help children to feel more secure in a situation in which many changes have taken place or may continue to take place.
8. **Keep discipline fair, reasonable, and age-appropriate.** Be watchful of how stress increases reactivity, and don't take emotions out on children.
9. **Do not change the rules.** Set limits and keep them as much as realistically possible so that children know what is expected of them. Help children manage their behaviors under stress by enforcing clear and reasonable boundaries.
10. **Balance discussion of the past with awareness of the present.** Allow children to talk as much as necessary about how things used to be, but also recognize that life is continuing in the present. Allow a forum for discussion about the ways things are now and how they may be in the future.
11. **Show your children how important they are.** Set aside time to have one-to-one, uninterrupted interactions with each child. Don't create additional losses for the children by becoming unavailable yourself.
12. **Be patient.** Grieving children may act out because of feelings of insecurity or abandonment, to provoke limit-setting, to externalize their grief feelings, or to try to protect themselves from future losses. Patience, understanding, and caring boundary-setting will help children work through feelings and return to appropriate behaviors more quickly.