

Sleep Disturbances

Bereaved children often experience sleep disturbances in the form of nightmares, difficulty falling and staying asleep, and sleep dependency. This is common and usually resolves itself, but it may be helpful to provide your child with some strategies in the mean time.

Nightmares: It is common for children to have scary dreams after someone they love dies. It may be helpful to create physical object with them that serves as a reminder that they are safe. Consider making a dream catcher together “catch” the good dreams and keep the bad ones out. It may also be helpful to decorate a pillowcase with favorite memories or things the child would like to dream about.

Difficulty Sleeping: Children may struggle to fall asleep or may wake from sleep more often after the death of a loved one. This is a common symptom of grief. Try these strategies:

- **Provide a Routine:** Just as it is difficult for an adult to come home from a long day of work and fall asleep without using a bedtime ritual, so children need routine to help them wind down. It may be helpful to provide calming activities like taking a bath or reading a book. This routine should be the same each night so the child can predict what is next.
- **Avoid Screens:** Television and games can over stimulate children and make it difficult for them to fall asleep. Try to avoid screen time before bed.
- **Protect the Sleep Space:** Encourage your child to only use his bed for sleeping so that he associates it with winding down. Allowing children to play in bed may interfere with their ability to fall asleep quickly.

Sleep Dependency: Children may want to co-sleep with their caregiver after a loved one dies. This helps them to feel safe and reassures them that the caregiver is OK. If co-sleeping becomes a concern, consider the following:

- **Offer Connection:** Children who are anxious about being separated from their caregiver may benefit from focused quality time before bedtime. Play a calm game with your child, read a book, talk about something the child is looking forward to the next day, or spend some time snuggling. Interactive activities like these will help your child to feel connected to you and may decrease bedtime separation anxiety.
- **Choose a Sleep Charm:** Search with your child around the house for a physical object that will help to remind her that she is loved and connected to you. This could be a favorite stuffed animal, a blanket, or something you create together.

- **Play It Out:** Young children most frequently communicate through play and are more likely to engage with the caregiver through play. Structured Doll Play can help children to predict what's next and feel less anxious about separation.

Structured Doll Play

- Walk your child through the nightly routine using dolls (puppets, action figures, or stuffed animals work too). Use real names of the people in the story and end your story on something positive that you can control. Let your child choose the dolls to play each character in the story.

Example: *This is a story about Jane going to sleep. Mommy is giving Jane a bath. Jane is splashing around and playing with her bath toys. Now Jane and Mommy are reading a book together. Mommy is tucking Jane into bed and talking with her about what she wants to dream about tonight. Now Mommy is giving Jane a kiss goodnight and turning off the light. Jane is falling asleep. Now Mommy is getting ready for bed and going to sleep in her room. Jane and Mommy are both sleeping. Now it's morning and Mommy is coming in to wake up Jane with a big kiss.*

References

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