

Dealing with Difficult Behavior

Grieving children may act out their feelings through increased tantrums, meltdowns, defiance, whining, and explosive emotions. Keep in mind that behaviors often reflect the child's drive to meet basic needs like security and love. When someone dies, a child may feel that these needs will not be met and may act-out in an attempt to regain a sense of security.

Caregiver Tips

Empathize: Like an iceberg, a child's behavior is only the tip of his experience under the surface. It may be helpful for parents to identify the feeling underneath the outburst and to address this while maintaining appropriate boundaries for the child.

Maintain Limits: "Where there are no limits, there is no security" (Landreth). Consider practicing the ACT model of encouraging acceptable behavior. This model, developed by Play Therapist Gary Landreth, communicates a limit to the child while maintaining acceptance: **ACT**

- **Acknowledge the Feeling:** communicate to the child that you understand her desires. Example: "I know you want to paint on the walls", "I know you're angry"
- **Communicate the Limit:** let the child know that there are appropriate and inappropriate uses for things and people. Example: "But ____ is not for ____", "But the walls are not for painting on", "But I am not for hitting"
- **Target the Alternative:** help the child identify an appropriate way to express the emotion. This alternative should be acceptable to both you and the child. Example: "You can paint on the paper instead", "You can hit your pillow instead"

Maintain Routines and Consistency: Children crave consistency. After someone dies, it is especially important to reassure the child that routines will remain the same to the extent that this is possible. This helps to reassure the child that her needs will be met. Often, caregivers feel they should make exceptions to a child's routine or discipline because they know the child is in pain. It is important to be consistent since children tend to feel most secure when they are not the ones deciding the boundaries.

Encourage Instead of Praise: Praise is a way of motivating children through external rewards (the parent's recognition and good opinion), while encouragement focuses on the child's internal self-evaluation and effort. Children who are encouraged develop self-motivation and self-control, as well as learn to accept responsibility and own up to mistakes. Consider adding more encouraging phrases to your vocabulary when speaking to your child.

Praise	Encouragement
"You were so good today" <i>The child may wonder if he's only accepted when he's good</i>	"You made progress practicing patience today" <i>shows the child his efforts are noticed</i>
"Good job! You go an A."	"You are proud of that grade! What would you like to do to celebrate?"
"You made a beautiful painting."	"You worked hard to paint that just the way you wanted it."

Make Time for Positive Family Interactions

The family relationship impacts a child's ability to cope after a loss. Providing opportunity for positive interactions may help the child to feel secure and decrease acting out. Consider starting a weekly family event that encourages interaction such as a game night, picnic, or visit to the playground.

Resources

Bo's Place. (n.d.). *A child's behavior is like an iceberg*. https://www.bosplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/16BOSP137_Iceberg_flyer_GTP.pdf

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The Dougy Center. (n.d.). *Supporting children and teens when someone dies from substance use*. https://www.dougy.org/docs/Supporting_Children_and_Teens_When_Someone_Dies_of_Substance_Use.pdf.

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Wolfelt, A. (2013). *Helping Children Cope With Grief*. United States: Taylor & Francis.