This Is Why

Showing Up After a Parent Dies

A Guide for Caring Adults



When a child or teen loses a parent, it can be hard to know what to say. You don't need perfect words. You can be someone who keeps showing up, whether you're a teacher, coach, relative, neighbor, family friend or the parent of their friend.

Follow the family's lead.



Ask a trusted caregiver what the young person knows, what language the family uses and what help would be welcome. Respect their beliefs and traditions. Don't press the child for details about how their parent died. If your role requires you to act on a safety concern, follow the appropriate safeguarding procedures.

Say something, without expecting a response.

Try: “I'm sorry your dad died. I'm here if you want to talk, and we can also just hang out.”

Try: “You don't need to say anything. I just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you.”

Use clear, age-appropriate language about death, following the family's lead. Avoid “I know how you feel,” “Everything happens for a reason” or “You have to be strong for your family.” No child should be made responsible for holding everyone else together.

Keep inviting them.

Make room for practice, games, jokes, silence and ordinary days. Don't assume that having fun means they're no longer grieving. Keep their place in the group and give them a choice about joining in.

Offer help you can follow through on.

Instead of asking the family to figure out what you could do, offer something specific: “Would a ride to practice on Tuesdays help?” Check with the caregiver and respect the child's preferences and any school or program rules. Keep promises small enough to keep. A meal or help with a school pickup can also make a difference to the person caring for them.

Let them have a say.

Before telling a class, team or group, check privately with the young person and their caregiver about what you have their permission to share. Don't make the loss their defining identity. Some teens might prefer talking while doing an activity or a brief check-in through an appropriate, caregiver-approved or school-approved channel. Give siblings room to want different things. Respect privacy, but don't promise secrecy about safety concerns.

Put the dates in your calendar.

Their parent's birthday, Mother's Day, Father's Day, holidays and milestones like a first game, recital, graduation or learning to drive. These moments might matter years later. If the family welcomes it, set a private, discreet reminder to check in. A simple “Thinking of you and your dad today” might be enough. Don't assume they want to mark every date. Before a family-themed school project or a celebration, offer options without singling anyone out.

Remember their parent, if they want that.

Ask, “Would you like to hear a memory I have of your mom?” If you knew their parent, you could offer to write down a memory for them to read when they choose. Respect a no.

Showing up in your role



Teacher:
Agree privately with the student and caregiver on what classmates need to know. Offer flexibility with assignments and a discreet, supervised way to take a break.

Coach or activity leader:
Keep inviting them to participate. If their parent used to be at every game, a quiet “I'm glad you're here” can be a welcome check-in. Coordinate any rides or additional support through appropriate adult channels.

Relative or family friend:
Don't disappear after the first few weeks. Offer ordinary, regular plans and share memories only when welcome.

Parent of their friend:
Keep inviting them over, with their caregiver's agreement. Help your own child understand that they can still be a friend without having to fix anything.

When to get more help

You don't need to be a counselor. If you notice concerning changes in daily life or behavior, bring the concern to a safe, responsible caregiver or the school's or program's designated safeguarding lead, and seek guidance from a qualified professional. Don't assume it is simply grief or wait for an arbitrary amount of time.

If a child or teen talks about wanting to die or harming themselves, take it seriously. Stay with them if you can do so safely, involve an appropriate trusted adult or safeguarding lead immediately, and get professional help. Don't promise to keep it secret. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis guidance, including if you're worried about someone else; call 911 in immediate danger. Elsewhere, use local crisis or emergency services. Follow applicable school, program and reporting procedures.

Find grief support

- National Alliance for Children's Grief: find a support center or camp (nacg.org/find-support/).
- Dougy Center: supporting a grieving child (www.dougy.org/resource-articles/how-to-help-a-grieving-child-1), supporting a grieving teen (www.dougy.org/resource-articles/how-to-help-a-grieving-teen) and grief at school (www.dougy.org/articles/back-to-school-and-grief-tips-for-parents-caregivers-and-educators).
- Eluna: grief programs and resources for young people and families (elunanetwork.org/).

About This Is Why

This Is Why is a grief support platform and community for people who lost a parent during childhood or adolescence. Our founder, Bryan Jung, lost his dad as a child.

Content note: Bryan's story describes a parent's violent death. Read Bryan's story.
https://www.thisiswhy.life/our-stories/introduction

Explore This Is Why's resources.
https://www.thisiswhy.life/resources

This guide offers general information, not therapy or crisis care.

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