LivingArts

Helping to heal hearts, families

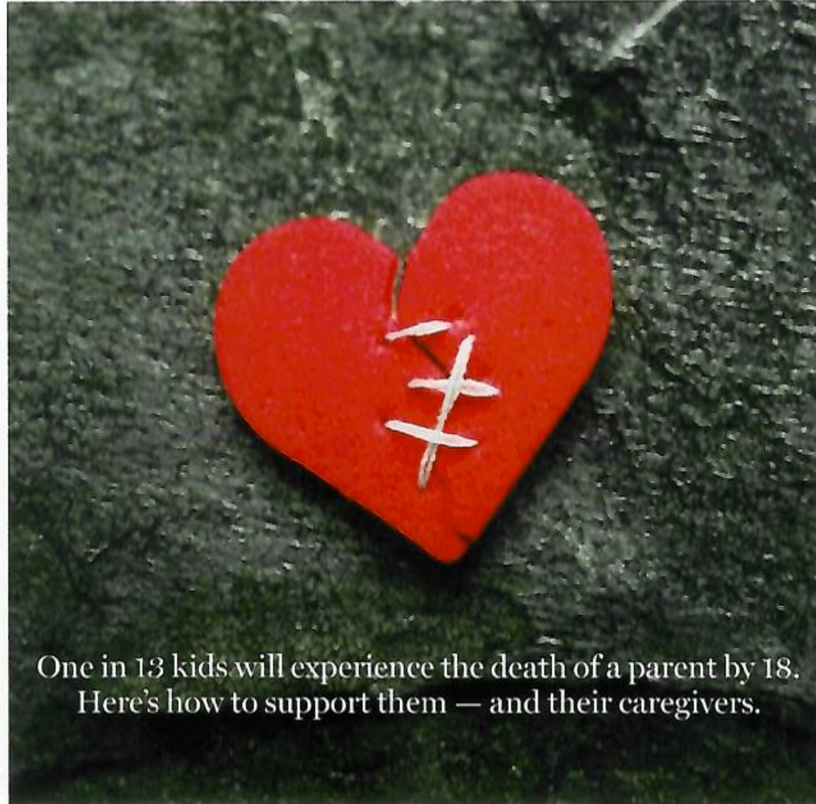
By Kara Baskin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

When we're caught up in day-to-day parenting — deciphering math homework, fishing uneaten sandwiches out of backpacks — it's natural to sweat the small stuff. I spent an hour last night trying to explain algebra to my 12-year-old. The evening ended in tears.

But here's some perspective: According to the Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM), an estimated 1 out of 13 children in the United States experiences the death of a parent or sibling before they reach the age of 18. Worldwide, COVID-19–associated orphanhood and caregiver death left an estimated 10.5 million children mourning a parent or caregiver. In Massachusetts, opioid-related deaths soared to an all-time high 2021 (though they're declining ever so slightly this year), leaving even more kids in trouble.

"I believe that [bereavement] is a national health crisis," says Dr. Jenny Kaplan, founder and research director at Jeff's Place in Framingham. Jeff's Place is named after Kaplan's brother, who drowned as a teenager. It offers support groups, workshops, and resources for grieving kids and families. Kaplan also developed the Inventory of Youth Adaptation to Loss (IYAL). This measures outcomes associated with grief support services by tracking changes over time related to a child's communication, sense of social support, sense of connection, and social and emotional experiences of loss and resilience.

Yet for so many of us, it's easy to donate $20 on a GoFundMe page and move on to what's right in front of us, like bad math. But for 1 out of 13 families, it's so much more complicated than that. If you want to support a child who's dealing with the death of a parent — or grappling with a parent's difficult diagnosis — here are ways to weave empathy and compassion into your family's daily life.



One in 13 kids will experience the death of a parent by 18. Here's how to support them — and their caregivers.

How to help: Don't put the burden on a parent who might be dealing with a sick spouse — or their own illness — to find errands for you to do. Instead, text from the grocery store and ask what they need. Say you'll pick up for carpool at 7 p.m.

"Proactively offer support in ways that are helpful without putting the onus on the one who's having the challenging time," Kaplan says, and model this for your kids. Take them to the grocery store. Bring them along on the errand. Be open in your thoughtfulness.

When to reach out: If you're worried about intruding, here's a rule of thumb: Check in as often as you would have before things got bad. So, if you were daily texters sharing memes about daycare, a daily text is appropriate. If you were once-a-week connectors during "Succession," a once-a-week offer is helpful and not intrusive.

"It depends on the quality of the relationship," Kaplan says. "But I've been running bereavement programs for almost 30 years, and what people tell us over the years is: 'I really appreciate when someone reaches out in some form, whether it's phone call, text, or just a 'Hey, thinking of you.'"

It's not as if your message is suddenly going to remind them of their situation. They already know.

How often to follow up: There's nothing wrong with asking if they want (or don't want) a check-in. "You can say: 'Hey, if I'm being annoying and you don't want me to continue asking you about this, I won't be offended at all," Kaplan says. "Be curious."

Yes, directness is refreshing — and authentic. They might welcome it; they might tell you that they're good for now. Feel free to ask every so often, just to see if things have changed. It might even deepen your friendship. Kaplan says that many of her clients come to her surprised at who showed up for them during times of trouble (and who didn't). Make sure your family falls into the former category.

Parenting Unfiltered

When your kids feel like something's fishy: Maybe you're close with the parents but your kids aren't good friends, and maybe they're asking why you're carpooling or babysitting some neighbor they barely know. Give your own children an example of someone who was nice to them during a tough time, and tie it back to what you're doing now.

Then say: "They don't have to be your best friend, but we're going to open our hearts, and we're just going to give them a safe place to be. This is the way our family is, and this is the culture of who we are," Kaplan says.

How to explain death to little kids: For kids, death is typically abstract, as it should be. Kids are naturally self-involved; it's developmentally appropriate (if incredibly annoying at times).

It's safe to assure your kids that most people live until they're old. Kaplan frames illnesses such as cancer as "a body part stopped working. Most people's body parts work or can be fixed or helped with some kind of medical intervention, but sometimes that's not the case," with age-appropriate elaboration. (Mass General has a helpful guidebook on framing illness for kids; it's written for parents and educators, but it's instructive for anyone trying to be supportive.)

Deaths by overdose or suicide can be trickier to explain to your kids, because there's often stigma and blame involved. She urges parents to remember that terms such as "committed" suicide fuel this shame. Instead, "died by" shifts the cause. Urge your kids to use that terminology, too.

What to suggest to your own kids who want to help a friend: Kaplan routinely hears from bereaved kids that they genuinely appreciate when a peer reaches out, even if it's on social media. (Kaplan still remembers the name of the classmate — not even a friend — who called her to check in when her brother died.) It makes a lasting impression.

The sentiments don't need to be elaborate. If your kids are closer, they can reach out and ask to do an activity. If they're not, a simple "this really sucks; I'm thinking of you" is better than silence.

If your kids are old enough, remind them not to connect the sadness back to themselves. It's human nature: In an effort to relate, we grope for commonalities. But sometimes those commonalities just aren't there. Kids might misguidedly bring up a goldfish dying or when they lost a soccer game. When in doubt, encourage your kids to simply listen or to validate sadness, not try to share their own story. (The same goes for adults!)

"When somebody's telling you their story, you don't have to go right into your story," Kaplan says — which can be applied throughout life, in so many situations.

How to be thoughtful for years to come: Send a card or a text on the death date. Again, you're not going to somehow remind them of the death. If your kids are older, ask them to do the same.

When to know your limits: Much as your own kids might want to be there for a struggling friend, there are aspects to grief that they can never understand unless they've experienced the exact same loss.

Peer-based programs like Jeff's Place or The Children's Room in Arlington allow kids to be with other people who get it, which promotes long-term resiliency and communication skills. You should definitely encourage your child to check in with their friend, but: Don't be offended if they don't want to talk. It's not a barometer of their friendship. Your child might not be the right audience.

"Just be kind and compassionate. If it's a really close friend, you can say, 'Hey, I'm wondering if you're thinking about your dad.' But, for most kids, it's hard, because these kids don't want to be different than their peers — and they already are," Kaplan says.

Ultimately, grief is a personal journey. You may want to help, and you may want your kids to help, but there's only so much anyone can do.

How to be realistic: When it comes to bereavement, the only way around it is through.

"Sometimes you've just got to sit in the mud. Sometimes you do it in community with others, but there's no way around it," Kaplan says.

That's why it's important to normalize grief. It's natural. Your child might want to cheer up a friend, and you might want to do the same. But showing your kids that it's OK to feel upset, sad, or angry is an important life lesson, too.

Kara Baskin can be reached at kara.baskin@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @kcbaskin.