

# HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR GRIEVING CHILDREN ON MOTHER'S AND FATHER'S DAY



**These holidays can be painful for kids who've lost a parent – and a time of healing as well.**

**By Irwin Sandler - May 9, 2018**

As we approach Mother's Day this weekend and with Father's Day coming up next month, it's important to remember that for some, this is a very painful time of year. For children who have lost a parent, holiday celebrations focused on the presence of mothers and fathers can evoke poignant memories and stir up strong feelings of grief, loss, and alienation.

A recent survey from the New York Life Foundation attests to the challenges these holidays pose for grieving children. Seventy-five percent, or 3 of 4 people who have lost a parent growing up say that they wish there was greater sensitivity towards bereaved individuals around Mother's Day and Father's Day.

Parents who have lost a partner will often be facing intensified grief of their own during these holidays. But it's critical to engage and extend support to your children at this time – to the benefit of the whole family. Based on my experience researching and engaging with bereaved families, the quality of support that children receive from their surviving parent after the death is one of the strongest predictors of their ability to cope over time.

For surviving parents tasked with leading their children through a difficult month-long period encompassing these parent-focused holidays, here are some specific steps to help kids memorialize the deceased parent in a meaningful way:

**1. Plan ahead.** There is no single right way to spend the holiday. Your family should decide what's best for them. Planning ahead is very helpful. Talk with your children about what they want to do. This sends the message that their ideas and feelings matter, and recognizes that there may be differences. You can simply ask, "What should we do for Mother's/Father's Day this year?" This question recognizes both that their feelings are important, and that the holiday is a shared experience of the family.

**2. Practice self-care.** Although, as a parent, you may be particularly concerned with your children's experience, it's important to recognize you also need to take care of your own needs. You need to give yourself permission to find comfort in your own way, as well as to share the day with your children.

**3. Recognize that each child is grieving and remembering in their own way.** It's important to recognize that each child has a somewhat different experience of death, and of loss. Honor those differences in how they experience grief and what each child needs to do to find meaning and comfort and to memorialize their deceased parent.

**4. Recognize the shared experience.** The holiday is often a time to support each other. Experiencing it together affirms family bonds – and particularly shared memories. Sharing memories, rituals and feelings can create moments of intimacy that strengthen families.

**5. Listen.** The discussions leading up to and during the holiday provide an opportunity to listen to each other. Listening can deepen your understanding of your children and what they see as important. Listening also sends the message that their experiences and feelings matter to you.

**6. Debrief afterward.** After the holiday has passed it can be very helpful to ask each child how he or she felt about what you did. It may not be easy for kids to talk about this, but just hearing you ask the question can open lines of communication and make planning for next year easier.

**7. There is no formula for how to do the holidays – no single right way.** By planning ahead, recognizing and respecting both the individual experiences and the shared experiences of the family, you can help each family member find healing and even strengthen your family.

Finally, it's important to keep in mind that while Mother's Day and Father's Day may serve as a trigger for your child's grief, providing ongoing love, support and understanding is critical – even years after the death.

If you think your child may benefit from additional support, local bereavement centers and programs can offer peer support groups, educational resources, and a safe, inclusive community for your child to connect with other grieving children. Additionally, bereavement camps – usually offered during the summer or on the weekends throughout the year – can provide children grieving the loss of a family member with a fun, healing experience that brings together traditional camp activities with bereavement education and emotional support. Many of these camps, typically for children ages 6 to 17, are offered free of charge. If you're looking for local support, check out grief organizations and camps in your region like Heartlinks or state at [www.childrengrieve.org](http://www.childrengrieve.org).

While the upcoming celebrations of parents can be painful for grieving families, they can also serve as an important time of healing. When approached with care, the holidays can open a door for family members to memorialize their missing loved one – in their own way and together as a family.

For more information, please call Heartlinks at 618-277-1800.

