

Discipline



A death in the family can create chaos, which in turn can contribute to your child expressing uncharacteristic behaviors or perhaps worsen preexisting problematic behaviors. Keep in mind that most children act out because they are seeking connection and a reminder that they are not alone. Maintaining a positive parent-child relationship, one that is supportive, structured, open, and includes a balance of love and discipline, is one of the most important ways you can support your child through this challenging period.

Another challenge after losing a loved one is the change in roles experienced by each family member. You may need to create new roles for yourself or restructure established roles to accommodate all the roles that your deceased loved one played. One of your new identities may include being the disciplinarian in the family. Or, if this was already your established role, you may need to develop new strategies to manage your child's new behavior. To this end, it may be easiest to organize your parenting tools into preventative and in-the-moment strategies, as outlined below:

Preventative strategies

- **Practice empathy.** Empathy may help you connect to your child in two ways: first, by encouraging productive conversations about the deceased and, second, by helping to validate your child during disciplinary conversations. Having discussions about your deceased loved one may afford you the opportunity to empathize with your child and allow each family member the opportunity to express emotions in a nonjudgmental and safe way. Keep in mind that your child may want someone just to listen to them without giving advice, solutions, or judgments. You might find that your child is more willing to share his feelings if you share your feelings as well. Try to be as truthful with them as possible, remembering to talk in age appropriate terms. The second way of using empathy may help when dealing with a disagreement between you and your child. Consider acknowledging their feelings while still enforcing your rules. Your child may be more willing to listen if their feelings have been validated.
- **Use positive reinforcement.** Praising your child's positive actions can encourage continuation of that healthy behavior. If you attach the praise to a behavior rather than a characteristic, it can help your child feel more in control of his actions and inspire further growth. For example, telling your child "you showed persistence in completing that task" rather than "you're smart" may inspire further growth. Or "I like how you stopped and thought about what you wanted to do" rather than "good job."

In-the-moment strategies

- **Practice self-awareness.** Be aware of your emotions when having serious or challenging discussions with your child. If you are feeling overly emotional, then your ability to calmly address problematic behavior will decrease (and may result in your own problematic behavior!) In those instances, it might be helpful to put the conversation on hold until you feel calmer. Instead, do things that you know will help you relax, such as taking a walk, meditating, journaling, etc. You may also be able to calm down by focusing on what you can control: your volume, tone, eye contact, posture, physical position and word choice.
- **Be consistent and assertive.** Your child might try to test and re-test set boundaries and rules, in which case your challenge may be to remain consistent with the new rules you set in place. It is likely that your child is trying to determine if you are reliably in charge and, subsequently, that they are safe. With teens, consider inviting them to share their opinion while reminding them that you will make the final decision. It can be helpful to establish consequences in advance, so that if a rule is broken, your child can see that behaviors have





consequences and know what to expect.

- **Try problem-solving together.** When possible, try giving your child the opportunity to choose between options. This can encourage cooperation rather than arguments. Consider including your child in problem-solving conversations so they feel empowered and motivated. It may be helpful to keep a written record of solutions to general problems that the family has experienced. Having a go-to list of problem-solving choices may help to quickly resolve future disputes.

Further Reading:

- *Playful Parenting* by Lawrence J. Cohen
- *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *The Whole-Brain Child* by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
- *Companioning the Grieving Child* by Alan D. Wolfelt

References:

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- Don't Discuss Everything. (n.d.). Retrieved July 9, 2015, from http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/strategies_11.html
- Strategies for Working it Out. (n.d.). Retrieved July 9, 2015, from http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/negotiate_2.html

