

When I . . .	I may be saying . . .	How you can support me . . .
Go back to earlier behaviors—cry for my bottle, suck my thumb, want to be carried everywhere, have toileting accidents	I'm having a hard time holding it all together. I want it to be like it was when I was younger and Daddy was here with us.	Be patient with me. Don't force me to act like a big kid right now. I will adjust to this change over time and return to using my "big kid" abilities. If you are worried about me, talk with a professional who knows about babies and toddlers—my doctor, an early childhood professional, and/or a counselor.
Tell people my daddy died; tell a story about my daddy; touch a strange man's face.	I miss my daddy. Talking about him and the fact that he died helps me cope with it.	Talk with me about Daddy. Tell me stories about him. Play games we used to play together. Arrange for a male relative or friend to spend some time with us. If you are concerned about things I say or do, talk with a trusted professional, like my doctor.
Push you away; hit or bite you or another child; break something on purpose; have temper tantrums	I am having trouble dealing with my feelings.	Set clear limits in loving, ways: "I know you are angry, but it's not okay to hit." Give me safe, healthy ways to express my feelings, like stomping my feet when angry. Help me feel more in control by giving me acceptable choices, like choosing the books we read before bed.
Cry when I see someone in a uniform like Mommy's or Daddy's, or I don't want to look at old photos or hear stories today	It hurts me right now to be reminded of Mommy or Daddy.	Give me words for what I might be feeling. "You don't want to think about Mommy right now. That's okay. Let's look at the book with the funny animal pictures."

Ways to Nurture a Continued Connection to the Deceased Parent

- **Share photographs of the parent who died and photos of your entire family together.** Display them around the house. Make a photo album. Laminate some photos so a toddler can carry one in his pocket if he likes.
- **Tell family stories.** Young children love to hear details like, "You and Daddy would sit in the rocking chair and he would say, 'I love you' as you rocked together every night before bed." Or "Mommy always put strawberry jelly on your toast and then cut it into four pieces."

- **Sing the songs and read the books you enjoyed together.** You might also make up new songs that include the parent who has died.
- **Build connections between your child and the parent he may never have met.** "Daddy used to sing to you when you were in my belly," or "Daddy kept the photo I sent him of you in his uniform pocket where he could see you every day."



Resources

Military OneSource

Military OneSource is available 24/7 to connect families with services including information about child development, child care, and coping with the loss of a parent. You can talk with a trained consultant to discuss options, resources, or referrals. Confidential counseling is available in person, by phone, and via e-mail. Go to www.militaryonesource.com or call 800-342-9647.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors

TAPS is a one-of-a-kind nonprofit Veteran Service Organization offering hope, healing, comfort, and care to thousands of American Armed Forces families facing the death of a loved one. TAPS is a family that lovingly welcomes survivors—young and old—with the words: "We hope you will lean on us whenever you need an ear or a hug or a shoulder to lean on!" TAPS now hosts an online community and smaller community-based chats and socials. The organization receives no government funding. However, all families faced with the death of one serving in the Armed Forces receive information about TAPS and other military survivor programs from the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs.

ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE's mission is to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers. The military webpage supports military professionals and parents with postings of monthly articles, information, and events at www.zerotothree.org/military.

Source

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National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

Taking care of yourself and your baby



When a Military Parent of a Baby or Toddler Dies

I said to the children, "Listen, guys. You had the most incredible person for a father. That will leave a hole. But what I can promise is that while your lives will be different than we had planned and dreamed, they will be good. And that is how we can honor Dad's memory."

—A mother

Although your baby or toddler can't understand the details of her parent's death, or understand what it means to die, she is aware that something is happening. She is likely to notice differences, especially in her daily routine and in your behavior: your voice, your facial expressions, and your overall emotional state. These changes can leave her feeling uncertain or insecure. She looks to you for comfort and to help her understand and cope with her feelings at a time when you are also dealing with this terrible loss. That's why it's important for you to tune in to your own feelings and needs and to make sure you take care of them. This will in turn help you take care of your child.

Taking Care of Yourself

Here are some helpful suggestions from other parents who have experienced a similar major loss:

- **"Try to take things one day at a time.** It's hard to do. Everything gets jumbled. But step by step, you can make it."
- **"Redefine your priorities, and be aware that they will shift over time.** If you don't get out your holiday cards on time, big deal."
- **"Respectfully advocate for yourself.** Don't just assume that things will get better. If things

aren't working and you aren't getting the support you need, keep insisting until you get it. Taking care of yourself is one of the best ways you can take care of your child."

- **“Accept support—even if it’s difficult to do.** I'd prefer to handle things on my own. But it helps to have somebody else around—especially when you have a young child. So if people offer support, try to accept it.”

Talking With Your Child About Death

Telling your child about the death of his parent is the beginning of a conversation that will evolve over the years as he grows older. Your child doesn't need you to come up with the perfect words. He just needs to know that he can count on you.

It is best to use truthful, clear, and simple language: “Daddy got hurt badly and cannot breathe or move. He is dead.” Saying “He went to sleep” or “We lost him” can be confused with everyday experiences and may frighten a child.

You don't need to hide your feelings. Letting your child see you cry and explaining how you feel model for him that feelings are okay. Modeling this behavior will give him permission to express the wide range of feelings that are part of grief and mourning.

How Can I Ease My Child’s Fears?

Young children may address their concerns through their behavior or by asking direct questions. Here are some common worries children experience and ideas about how you can respond to them:

Will you die too? Your child may be worried that you will die too. You may also feel vulnerable and worried about this. Reassure your child by saying, for example, “I will not die for a long time, I'll be right here with you.”

Will I die also? Young children need to be reassured that they will not die too. “You are healthy and strong. You aren't in any danger. I'll take good care of you.”

What will happen to me? You help your child feel safe when you reassure her that the important adults in her life will be there to take care of her and when you give her a clear picture of her daily routine. For example, you might say, “Miss Cindy will be at child care to take care of you. After naptime, I'll pick you up just like Mommy used to.”

Understanding and Responding to Your Child’s Cues

Although your child may not have the words to tell you what she feels and needs, her behavior can help you understand what she is experiencing. The chart below is in a child’s words to help you tune in to what she may be thinking and feeling. It also offers examples of supportive responses.

When We Get the News:

When I ...	I may be saying ...	How you can support me...
Cry, fuss, cling, withdraw, and get quiet and still	I know something is going on. When you are upset and distracted, I may feel insecure and afraid. I'm confused. My routine is upset. I may be hungry or tired.	Tell me simply and honestly about what is happening. “I am crying because I am very sad that Mommy died.” Try to keep my routine the same. I feel safe when I know what to expect. Be sure I have my “lovey” (my special blanket or stuffed animal) whenever possible. It helps me feel safe. Arrange for someone I know and trust to care for me when you need a break.

Did I cause the death? Young children may believe that their anger (e.g., at a parent being away) can be harmful. You can help your child learn that this is not true by explaining, “All children get angry at their parents sometimes. Being angry doesn't make someone get hurt or die. Sometimes we get angry, but we still love each other.”

I want to die so I can be with Daddy. Validate that she misses her father and wants to be with him. Then help her see how wonderful it is to be alive by telling her how much you and others love her and talking about all the fun things you do and will do together. You might also tell her how much her dad would want her to keep growing and learning.

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During the Memorial Service:

When I ...	I may be saying ...	How you can support me...
Fuss or whine	I need a break.	Have someone I know and trust there who can focus on me—feed, rock, walk, or play with me.
Stare, look wide-eyed, cling, go back to sucking my thumb	I'm confused and overwhelmed.	Tell me simply and honestly about what is happening. “We are all saying good-bye to Daddy.”

As Life Goes On...

When I ...	I may be saying ...	How you can support me...
Cry, protest, hit, cling, withdraw	I'm afraid. My world is feeling out of control.	Reassure me that I am safe and that you will keep me safe: “Mommy's body was very badly hurt and couldn't get better. Your body is strong and the boo-boos you get are small and can be fixed.” Put words to my feelings and offer me comfort: “I know you are sad that Daddy isn't coming home. Should we sit in the rocking chair and look at these pictures of Daddy together?” Give me safe and healthy ways to show my feelings. Make up an “angry” dance. Give me lots of time outdoors. Keep reassuring me that what happened isn't my fault. Take care of yourself. I need you.
Pretend play that Mommy is shopping and will be home soon	It's hard to understand that Mommy will never come home again. Maybe if I pretend it isn't true, she will come back.	Try to help me understand my feelings. Gently remind me that Mommy has died, which means she isn't coming home: “You want her to come home with the groceries but she can't because she died.” Remind me how much she loved me and that she didn't choose to die and leave me.
Have nightmares or develop new fears	I'm unsure and afraid; my life feels out of control.	Reassure me that you will keep me safe. Comfort me.