

What to Say When Families Grieve

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Use these expert insights so you know what to say when families grieve a divorce, terminal illness, miscarriage or still-birth, or the death of a child.

Loss and grief, just like joy and celebration, are part of life. Throughout your years as a children's minister, you'll undoubtedly cross paths with a tragedy involving one or more of your ministry's children. Whether it's the death of a marriage or the unthinkable death of a child, it's vital to be prepared in your role to support grieving children and families. Even though our human nature drives us to avoid sad topics such as divorce, death, terminal illness, and miscarriage, these very situations can be your most important moments in ministry. Your response — and demonstration of God's presence — may be what helps see a family through its darkest hour. We asked experts to offer guidelines on what to do, what to say, and how to best support families and children experiencing trauma. Read on for their insights.

What to Say When Families Grieve Divorce

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 40 to 50 percent of marriages will end in divorce. Split families and dual households are a reality for many of the children in your ministry. But how do you help a child and his or her family in the midst of divorce? Linda Ranson Jacobs, one of the forefront leaders in the area of children in single parent families and children in crisis and the executive director of [DivorceCare for Kids](#), offers this advice.

Do Say...

Children need acceptance. Children in a newly divorced family need attention and loving arms. They need to know that they're safe and that the church will welcome them regardless of their circumstances. Many children have expressed that they feel cast aside by the church after the divorce. Call kids weekly. They may miss a lot due to visitation schedules, but they still need to know they belong to your church and that you welcome them — no matter how many times they miss.

Single parents need support. Single parents need understanding. Almost every newly separated or divorced single parent is under a tremendous amount of stress. Some are almost incapable of parenting at this time, so walk beside them and be there to assist with day-to-day living — offering to pick up groceries, taking care of the children while the parent looks for a job, being on the emergency call list at the child's daycare or school.

Families need practical help. Sometimes families need financial help, but be careful not to take away their dignity. Many children are embarrassed by their parents' divorce and they're cognizant that they don't have the finances to take part in many church activities. Provide "backstage" ways they can take part in all activities through anonymous gifts. Remember that even purchasing a workbook for a Bible study may be out of the reach of some single parents. Also, help kids purchase gifts for their parents on their birthdays or holidays. Imagine how disconcerting it is to be a child of 8 or 9 with no way of providing a gift for your parent's birthday.

Families need prayer. Pray, pray, pray for divorcing families. Learn about children of divorce. Develop an empathetic heart toward these families. Help other adults understand the loss these children and families feel.

Don't Say...

Watch your boundaries. It's inappropriate to try to take over a single parent's life. Don't pity children from single-parent homes. They need your empathy, not your sympathy. It's also very inappropriate to try and arrange the single parent with dates.

Avoid promoting false hope. Don't pray with the child that a parent will return home. Instead, pray for practical things. Little girls worry about their daddies' practical needs. Little boys worry about their moms being strong enough to take care of things. (That's great insight!)

Welcome Words

- "I'm so sorry this is happening to you. How can I help?"
- "It's not your fault that your Mom/Dad left."
- "You are loved, and I'll always be here to talk to you and be your friend."

What-Were-You-Thinking Words

- "You'll get over this."
- "You're better off."
- "He/She was a loser anyway. You can do much better."
- "God never gives you more than you can handle."
- "I understand what you're going through."
- "If you just have enough faith, your Mom/Dad/spouse will come back."

What to Say When a Family Grieves a Child's Terminal Illness

A child's terminal illness is one of the most wrenching, heartbreaking experiences a family can experience. As a children's minister walking this unbearably difficult path alongside a family, it may be difficult to see past your own anguish — but these families need you now more than ever. [Children's Hospital Colorado](#) is renowned for its quality healthcare services and compassionate care for ill children and their families. Geri Nelson, a licensed clinical social worker and coordinator of bereavement services; Reverend Vanessa Owen, a staff chaplain; and Reverend Claudia Schmitt, also a staff chaplain, collectively offer these words of advice for children's ministers helping families through the terminal illness of a child.

Do Say...

Focus on how the family feels. Families need you to not be afraid of their child's illness, death, or pain. Be open enough to simply listen without feeling the need to give advice or "make it better." Allow families to talk about their child, tell stories, share memories, and laugh. Realize that the family is suffering tremendously, regardless of what you say or do.

Offer your love and genuine care, not solutions. There's nothing that can take away their sorrow. Families simply need people who are willing to walk through "the valley of the shadow of death" with them.

Offer specific assistance. Proactive and practical help is often overlooked, though it offers great support. The key is to offer specific tasks you can do. “Are there groceries I can pick up for you?” “Can I mow your lawn?” Don’t assume because parents aren’t calling that they wouldn’t welcome help. Make it easier for them to accept help.

Don’t Say...

Don’t put responsibility on the family. Most of us at some time have said to someone who’s struggling, “Please, just let me know if there’s anything I can do.” A family coping with terminal illness and death often won’t have the emotional or even physical strength to pick up the phone and ask for help. Often, parents are so overwhelmed they don’t know what to ask for or what would be helpful.

Don’t disappear. Be brave enough to approach a grieving family. Many people say that after the loss of their child, people disappear. Friends and family stop calling. Workmates turn the other way. Confronting grief is an incredibly difficult and scary thing to do; that’s why avoiding it is a common coping tool. Grief must be attended to — by the one who’s grieving and the community surrounding that person. By simply showing up with care and compassion, you’ve extended a precious gift.

Don’t try to take away people’s grief. We take people’s grief away when we try to defend God or supply philosophical statements explaining away the situation. Grief is personal. There’s no wrong or right way to experience it. Change your view of grief by seeing it as a friend and not an enemy. Grief is the natural process of healing one’s broken heart.

Welcome Words

You probably won’t have the right words to say. In fact, it can be more helpful to be compassionately present and allow parents to express their beliefs and feelings about their child’s terminal illness rather than searching for the right thing to say.

What-Were-You-Thinking Words

Even if you believe these words, don’t say them. These common phrases will never ease a family’s pain: “Your son/daughter is in a better place now” or “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Educate yourself on the stages and symptoms of grief. Lack of understanding often results in damaging behaviors and statements: “You shouldn’t feel like this” or “You can’t think like that.”

What to Say When a Family Grieves a Stillbirth or Miscarriage

Often minimized as a “lesser loss,” couples and families suffering the loss of an infant through stillbirth or miscarriage many times feel invisible. Kathryn Jackson of [Shiloh](#), a unique ministry for people experiencing infertility or the loss of an infant at Watermark Community Church in Dallas, Texas, has ministered with her team to many families in this situation.

Do Say...

Provide long-term support. Don’t stop checking on families after one or two months. Ask — months later — “How are you doing? How do you feel about things now that a couple of months have passed?”

Offer faith tools for parents. Provide tools for grieving parents to use in discussing the loss with their other children. One mom at Shiloh expressed that in her grief, she wasn't able to get her mind together enough to articulate to her children the truths she knew about God. She wasn't asking for children's ministry to convey those truths to her kids, but to instead give her and her husband an avenue for communication with helpful tips from ministry.

Offer “been-there” supportive connections. Ask parents if they'd like to connect with someone in your ministry who's had a similar experience. The Shiloh ministry has a group of volunteers who meet one-on-one with people who request it. These volunteers have experienced similar trials and have a special heart for ministering to others experiencing this loss.

Sensitize your congregation. Find ways to educate your congregation on sensitivity and ministering to those grieving. We've found that simply sharing stories of God working amidst grief in our weekly news has a profound impact and heightens people's awareness.

Acknowledge the child. If the baby who was lost was named, use his or her name in notes or conversations. Consider giving parents a keepsake with the baby's name on it — a hand-painted cross or an engraved bracelet charm. A tree or flowering bush or donation to a special charity are also sweet gifts.

The bottom line is, do something. Stillbirth and miscarriage is often a time when most people say nothing and do nothing; it's incredibly comforting to hear someone validate your grief with a card, a kind word, or a practical gesture of help. The simple words “I'm so sorry for your loss” mean the most and are usually all someone wants to hear.

Don't Say...

Don't wait to take action. Waiting to approach the family is a mistake. Respond as quickly as possible. Seasons of grief vary in length — from days to years. Your window to minister may not last long. And, what might mean a lot to someone right away might not mean as much two weeks later.

Welcome Words

Using phrases such as, “I'm sorry you're going through such a difficult time” and “This must be so painful for you” is a good way to validate someone's feelings.

What-Were-You-Thinking Words

Eliminate the words “But at least...” from your vocabulary. Any time you use these words, you're minimizing someone else's pain: “But at least you miscarried early in your pregnancy.”

Don't compare pain you or someone else has experienced: “Don't worry, you've only been trying to have a baby for two years, and I know another lady who tried for six before her son was born.”

Also, don't talk about your own children. Avoid looking for solutions or offering “the bright side of things”: “You can always adopt,” “Maybe you should try another doctor,” or “At least you already have a child.”

Don't ask personal questions: “When is your next fertility treatment?” or “Are you going to try again?”

Don't take the things we know to be true and turn them into hurtful words: “God's timing is perfect,” “It must be God's will,” Or “You just need to turn it over to God.”

What to Say When a Family Grieves a Child's Death

When a child dies, families experience trauma that's devastating and unimaginable to most. A child's death wounds many — family, peers, teachers, ministers, community members — some of whom will never fully heal or return to life as they knew it before the tragedy. Joanne Cacciatore, Ph.D., is a researcher at Arizona State University and CEO of [MISS Foundation](#), an organization dedicated to providing crisis support and long-term aid to families after the death of a child. Cacciatore knows firsthand what it means to experience this tragedy. After the death of her daughter in 1994, Cacciatore dedicated herself to researching and supporting families in this situation. "I said to myself," recalls Cacciatore, "If I get through this — if I actually survive this — because you really do question whether or not you're going to live, the pain is so physical — I'm going to help some people." Here's her advice.

Do Say...

Seek education and professional support. Educate yourself, your ministry team, and the parents of surviving children on grief. You'll be dealing with grief from all sides — the family's, classmates', teachers', and yours. The better you understand it, the better you'll be able to help others.

Be age-appropriate in your response. For younger kids, it's important to include all children — if they want to participate — in rituals such as the funeral. Provide access to information for parents about children's grieving. When an adolescent dies, surviving peers turn more to friends than adults. Adolescents are very reliant on their peers for support.

Facilitate discussion or support groups so kids have an opportunity to talk. It's absolutely critical to have a skilled facilitator present for this, someone with specialized training in children's grief. Counselors, therapists, and other mental health professionals can actually do more harm than good if they're not trained.

Create a circle of unwavering support. It's a myth that most families split up following a child's death. That myth isn't supported by research; conversely, most studies suggest that families stay together after the death of a child. What's really important to these families is social support. We know that families who have good social support tend to have better outcomes.

Don't Say...

Don't ignore it. It's wholly inappropriate to pretend this tragedy didn't happen. If a child dies and you go back to business as usual, you're being very unwise. In order for families, you, your team, and the children in your ministry to move forward, engage, and function, everyone needs to identify his or her individual loss.

Don't offer lopsided support. Don't focus all your care, compassion, and support on surviving children and forget about the parents. Entire family systems are adversely affected by a child's death. You can provide all the help and support in the world to a grieving child, but if you send him or her back to a family that's not been supported, the result is dysfunction.

Take care of practical needs. It's hard for parents to cook, clean, or focus on the day-to-day, mundane things of life. Ministries must come together to provide for the family while not intruding on private time. Make meals, deliver them, and leave. Take surviving siblings to the zoo for the day so parents can have quiet time to grieve. Clean their house. During this emotional tumult and trauma, practical interventions can be extremely helpful.

Welcome Words

The baseline for understanding how to talk to a family is that this is a tragedy that'll last this family as long as they're on earth. The effects of a child's death are forever. Do say, "I'm so sorry," "I can't imagine" and "I'll be here for you now, six months from now, and six years from now."

What-Were-You-Thinking Words

There aren't words in the English language to describe what happens to a family when a child dies. There's nothing you can say to fix the situation. Don't try to come up with wise words and avoid platitudes.

Avoid saying things such as "God only takes the best," "Everything happens for a reason," or "Time will heal all wounds." Those are trite attempts to justify why this awful, unthinkable tragedy could've struck. It's best for people who are trying to be of support to not say anything at all, but to instead be wholly present.