

a child's perspective

Suddenly Responsible

a guide for adults



life without parents

your love so your love lives on

Imagine a child's feelings of fear, loneliness, loss of control, uncertainty, and helplessness when their mommy and/or daddy dies. It is essential that we, as adults, understand the reality and impact this death has on a child, from the child's perspective.



our mission

When a child has a parent or parents die, their entire world and sense of security is forever changed. Our goal is to assist these children with the emotional and financial strain of such a traumatic and life altering event. There is no other organization providing the type of support the **In Loving Memory Foundation (ILMF)** offers.

*"I still have a mom and dad. People think that you don't have them. No I do, they're just not alive."
(Age 13)*

purpose

The purpose of this guide is for you, as an adult, to understand the perspective of a child whose mommy and/or daddy has died. This guide will provide you with helpful ways to communicate with this precious child, that is now so dependent on your love.

As you read the following pages, you will see quotes in peach italic print; these quotes are from adults whose mom and/or dad died when they were children. The quotes are a small "snapshot" into a child's thoughts and reflections on how the words and actions of others made them feel.

*"I was angry at myself because I didn't get a chance to show my mom what I good person I could be, she died before I could show her."
(Age 13)*

a new role

"Initially, when my mother died the first thoughts that came to me is that I am now an orphan (dad died earlier) where will I live, what will happen to me, was there any money left to feed me, how will I go to college and who will ever love me like a mother does." (Age 4 and 15)

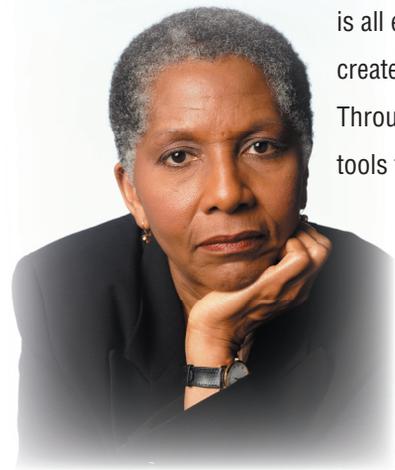
"Because my parents died,...I learned very early on that, life is precious; that you've got to enjoy it." (Age 3 and 16)

An adult who is charged with assuming the responsibility of raising and providing for a child(s) under the age of eighteen, who has had a parent(s) die, is referred to by The In Loving Memory Foundation (ILMF), in this guide as **Suddenly Responsible**.

Whether the **Suddenly Responsible** adult is a surviving parent, a relative, or a non-relative guardian - the new role can be overwhelming, reshaping one's world.

Living, inevitably includes experiencing the death of loved ones. Such a loss is painful and not easy for anyone. Imagine being age 4 or age 14 and surviving your parent(s): **Suddenly Alone, is the Child and Suddenly Responsible, is the appointed caregiver**. The entire world and future of both the child and the adult change forever.

New expectations, different lifestyles and other transitions occur for both the child and the adult. The important question remains: How best can this situation be approached? The **Suddenly Responsible** adult, now in charge, is encouraged to embrace the challenge and realize the importance of this new leadership role. Remembering that your influence on the child is all encompassing; every word spoken and every action taken, creates either a positive or negative affect on the child's future. Through this foundation, our goal is to provide insight and tools to equip the **Responsible Person** for this journey.





As human beings, our personality, attitude, hopes and dreams, are, in part, influenced by our memories which form our future outlook and expectations. Much like photographs in an album, we catalog emotional snapshots of events and experiences in our minds. Rarely do we recall all the details of people, places or events, rather we remember the emotional impact, such as how we felt, and whether a positive or negative impression was left.

The **Suddenly Responsible** adult can help a child minimize the negative feelings associated with his/her transitional journey and lifetime without their mother and/or father. A parents' death is surely a significantly unforgettable memory especially to a child. So to is the impact of others; interaction with the child during this critical period, heightened sensitivity, and unfamiliar territory. As the **Suddenly Responsible** adult, what positive, healthy, comforting memories will you contribute to a child's emotional snapshots?

*"I knew my fate was being decided at that kitchen table. And they didn't bother to ask who we wanted to live with or what we wanted. They, just were making the decisions."
(Age 14)*

"People always think that when your parents die, it's something that can be such a negative impact, instead of focusing on some of the positive things that it can bring. It taught me how to be stronger, dependent on myself instead of others and appreciate life because it could be cut short." (Age 4 and 15)

a challenge



“I had to just follow a whole new set of rules; and it was like walking into a completely different household. And, all of a sudden, you're just supposed to just snap right into it.”
You have to adjust to other people's styles. And you know they're not your parents; but you have to listen to them anyway or they may not want to take you in. You could be out on the streets.”
(Age 15)

“The day my Father died, was the last day in my life I felt totally safe and secure. One of my uncles put his arm around me after the funeral and said, take care of your mother. So part of my childhood was gone, because I tried to take on that adult role.”
(Age 8)

The adult charged with raising and providing care for a child, whose parent(s) has died, faces new challenges, which can be emotional, financial and will often disrupt established routines.

Just as a child may experience fear, loneliness, loss of control, uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and helplessness, similarly might the adult feel about the new responsibility of caring for a child that is not their own and did not want to be in this situation.

The adult should remember, (both intellectually and emotionally), that a parents' death is not the fault, or choice of the child. This means that, not only is the child often incapable of understanding the generosity of being “taken in”, and cared for by the **Suddenly Responsible** adult - the child may feel just the opposite. While dealing with the sudden trauma the child may resent having to live with the **Suddenly Responsible** adult,... rather wishing to living with mom and/or dad.

A grieving child is fragile. Suggesting, in any way, that the raising of him/her is burdensome, can be hurtful and devastating to a child. Consider equally, a child is not equipped (particularly emotionally), to be assuming any of the roles of a **Suddenly Responsible** adult. Even the subtle suggestion that they are now responsible for the surviving parent or sibling can end any remaining “childhood” immediately.

The **Suddenly Responsible** adult has reason to reach out for assistance. You have an important responsibility - to shape the environment of a vulnerable child's new reality. Numerous changes are difficult for anyone, and for a child to suddenly lose everything familiar - their home, friends, rules, and lifestyle can be a lot to handle.

an opportunity

In contrast to a child, the adult **Suddenly Responsible**, is clearly in the position to better understand death and the resulting life changes. The adult can take this opportunity to help the child, through perhaps one of life's most traumatic events; grieving for a parent(s). The adult has the opportunity to guide the child and create a transition that is as smooth as possible.



"Don't try to be my dad. And that's what bothered me, everyone felt that they had to play that role. Just be who you are and accept that noone can ever replace my dad." (Age 8)

a child's perspective

The grieving process will vary due to the age of the child and how the parent died (long term illness, sudden accident, or suicide). For example, young children often believe that the deceased person may return, teens may believe that death is unfair, while adults often question their own mortality.

Communication is more effective and the adult is better able to talk to a child if they have an understanding of the child's perception of death, and the situation. The following pages discuss, by age group, a child's typical behavior, feelings and perceptions of death in general.

"I appreciated being asked by my new guardian, if I wanted to stay in my house with my Grandmother to finish out the school year before moving to her house in another state. I chose to stay in my bedroom, with my friends and teachers I knew. This gave me time to understand and deal with my mother's death first and then giveme a few months to say good-bye to my previous life and prepare for the unknown of what lied ahead." (Age 14)

age 0-5

how children grieve

*"It's like that perfect, unconditional love is gone forever."
(Age 4 and 15)*

"I missed my daddy so much – I just wanted him to come back to play with me ... to give him a hug. I wondered if he missed me too and if he would be upset that other people were trying to be him." (Age 4)

*"The boy will be ok because he is a boy; but, you know they have feelings too."
(Age 8)*

"I don't ever want to forget him; but everyone else is telling me that I am supposed to forget, or I am supposed to move on or you'll get over it." (Age 4 and 15)

Between the ages of birth and 5 years old, a child is unable to understand death. They have separation anxiety which is displayed when they can not understand why mommy can't feed them or daddy can't tuck them in at night. You will hear them say ... "where is mommy", "how come daddy can't come home", "why did they leave me", "why can't I stay in my room", and "why are mommy and daddy gone, was I bad". They are not saddened by death, because they do not understand it; they miss their mommy and daddy and don't understand where they went and why they can not come home. Children this age also sense anxiety and sadness in other individuals around them; then they take on the same feelings, so you may want to be aware of your feelings and how you communicate them.

There is much chaos and disruption in the child's life when a parent(s) dies. This is why consistency is very important. From age 3-6, a child views their life from the experiences they have had to date. They see death as temporary and reversible, not understanding that when someone dies they do not return. Also, magical thinking occurs during this age. Children believe their thoughts, words, or actions cause a loved one to die. A child may yell "I wish you were dead" or "I hate you" during an argument, and then believe they caused the death if someone dies soon after.

Children express their emotions as sad, mad, and glad. When someone dies, they may express their feelings in any combination and at varying intensities. Let the child know it is ok to be mad, sad, or afraid. They should be allowed to cry or be sad, and to know that it is not wrong to feel this way. Children often show their feelings through their actions and their play, so this should be encouraged. Their behaviors on the outside often mirror how they are feeling on the inside, children at this age do not know how to mask emotion.

age 0-5

how adults can help

The key to helping this age group is to be a good listener. It is important to hear what they think happened and their understanding of death. Afterward the **Suddenly Responsible** adult can share their understanding of death, if appropriate. Explain things in a simple way. It is important to correct misunderstandings of what has happened.

Other suggestions include:

- Using the name of the person who died helps the child acknowledge the death and remember the person who died.
- Help the child(ren) choose a keepsake, so they will have a concrete connection to the person they love, miss and want to remember.
- When describing what has happened, avoid words like “sleep”, “lost” or “journey” to explain death, because at this age children think literally and may believe the person will return. They could also be afraid to go to sleep or for the **Suddenly Responsible** person to go to sleep because they could never wake up like mommy or daddy.
- Remember too accept that they may miss their mommy’s scent or how daddy played with them ... these are things you can never replace.
- Lastly, they often fear that they will be alone, so reassure them that this will not happen, someone will be there for them with no strings attached.

*“People would say, I’m sorry you lost your Dad. And, at four years old, you take it literally. And I thought, well, if he’s lost, he’ll find his way home. So, I just would, in the middle of the night, sneak out and just wait by the front door for him to come back”
(Age 4)*



age 5-11

how children grieve

*"It wasn't just grief, it was absolute terror."
(Age 11)*

*"Adults would pat me on the head and tell me everything's going to be okay, but it didn't feel o.k., because I wanted my Mom to come back."
(Age 10)*

From age 5-9, children begin to understand death is final. However, they tend to believe that it will happen to everyone else, not them. For ages 9-11, children begin to understand death is inevitable and can happen to them. At these ages children are curious about what happens to the body when someone dies. Wanting to know how the body functions after someone dies; they ask questions like: "How do you eat and drink when you are dead?" and "will they be able to breathe?" Also, children at this age see death as someone who is taking something from them. It is important to clarify these misconceptions. Since they are starting to develop a sense of what is right and wrong, many children consider death of a loved one as a punishment for bad things the child had done like not cleaning their room, losing a toy, or not telling the truth.





age 5-11

how adults can help

Once again, the key to helping this age group is to be a good listener.

- Listen to what they understand, then share your feelings with them.
- Do not try to always answer their questions. Remember that silence can be an answer.
- Give clear and concise information to this age group; correct misunderstandings.
- Be available to answer questions, and never lie or mislead them.
- Try to not act shocked or upset at their questions, but ask them the basis for their questions and help them learn.
- Do not talk down to them, and make sure that they are not ignored, ask their opinion (especially for those older than 9 years old).
- Let them choose one or more keepsakes, so that they will be able to remember and connect with their parent(s).
- Allow children at this age to have choices: for example, attending or helping plan the funeral, packing their own room for a move or having it packed for them.

*"I'd walk into a room and everyone would stop talking. I knew that everybody was unhappy and worried and that it was not just grief going on; that the whole world was going to be different from that point on."
(Age 15)*

*"They thought if they didn't talk about her, that I might stop thinking about losing her. She's my Mom,... I wanted to talk about her, but I knew they felt uncomfortable, so I quietly kept my sadness to myself".
(Age 16)*

*"I felt like our Mother and Father had abandoned us."
(Age 15)*

*"I'll never hear their voice again."
(Age 13)*

age 12-adult

how children grieve

"How could anyone think they know how I feel, unless they had a parent die when they were a kid? I used to hate it when someone would say, well, I don't have my dad either; he's not around (due to divorce). I wanted to scream,...Well I can't go to see my Dad for a weekend or for the summer. My Dad is dead!" (Age 14)



"And 'Mom' and 'Dad' are no longer part of your vocabulary. You just drop them; because there's no one to say it to." (Age 16)

Age 12 to adulthood is a time when teenagers begin to understand the concept of mortality. The teenager's reaction to death is often more influenced by their own emotional struggles than their intellectual understanding of death. They understand that death of a loved one can occur because of problems in the body's functioning, and not because of their thoughts or behaviors. Following the death of their mom and/or dad, adolescents wonder about their future and what will happen to them. They become unsure about their finances, future, and current relationships. They ask questions like "What will happen to the family since Mom / Dad died?" "How will I go to college?" Teens see death as inevitable, irreversible, and universal. Their understanding of death can be sought for in spiritual terms, and they become more philosophical about life and death.

What should I expect from the teen?

Shortly after a parent's death, teens may become withdrawn, very active or aggressive at times. They are experiencing feelings they have never had before and may be unsure how to deal with them. As time goes on, they may become sadder and reserved, so being observant is important. After a "while" they may want to talk more about what happened, or they may want to set up a memorial to the person who has died.

What should I do to help the teen?

Before talking to teens about the death of a loved one, there are many things to consider. Such as, child's age, understanding of death and maturity level. The closeness or distance the child had to the deceased parent can add different and difficult elements for the child to deal with the death. Considering how the death occurred and the surrounding circumstances will affect how he or she for the teen may feel.

The child's past experience with death, as well as the families' religious and cultural beliefs will affect reactions. If the **Suddenly Responsible** adult's religious and cultural beliefs differ from those of the child, you may want to familiarize yourself with the child's culture, religion or background.



age 12-adult

how adults can help

In addition to being a good listener, be available for the child but not overpowering; discuss their understanding of what has happened and clarify misconceptions.

- Try to be factual, not giving your opinion.
- Teens worry about how the death will affect their life: where will they live, what will they do for money, and what will their friends say. Keep them involved in these areas and with the decisions.
- Let teens choose items to remember their loved one.
- See if they would like to help plan the funeral, pack up belongings and be involved. Avoid assuming that participating would be burdensome or sad for the teen.
- Giving teens choices; empowers them and emphasizes that they matter.
- Many teens find communicating with peers easier than with adults. Since sharing feelings and receiving support is critical, encourage teens to talk to friends if they won't talk to you. If you don't know their friends, welcome them to your home, so the interaction occurs in your close proximity.
- Reassuring teens by saying "I know how you feel" or that "things will be ok" can actually be counter productive. Teens see these remarks as patronizing comments, they realize it is unlikely that others could really understand the complexity and depth of their feelings and it is impossible to guarantee the future will be "ok". Rather, reassure teens through consistency, allowing them to grieve in their own way. No one person really has a full comprehension of how another may feel. However, generally children feel having the parent(s) alive is "more ok", than any option you can present. So be understanding if they do not appear appreciative of your efforts.

*"...And in Spanish one word that I hate is pobrecita, poor little one; because everybody would always say "pobrecita," she doesn't have a mother. I wanted to tell them I have a mother, she's just dead."
(Age 16)*

*"I didn't want a replacement-just be my Aunt; just be my Grandmother; just be who you are; And let me be who I am; and let me remember my parents."
(Age 14)*

*"I felt like I wanted to be able to make decisions; but I knew that legally I wasn't going to be allowed to. So people who I didn't know, as well, were going to determine my future; and I was stuck with whatever decisions they made. And I had no choice."
(Age 15)*

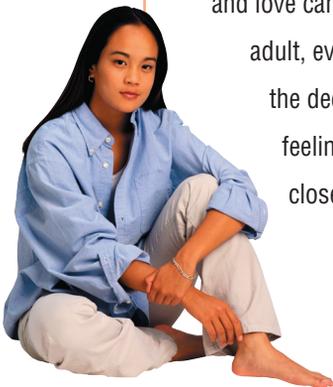
cherishing memories

so your love lives on

"I really loved hearing my mom's name. And I love hearing people talk about my Mom and Dad because it's the only way, especially when you're really young-- You're afraid that you're going to forget them; and you really didn't get a chance to know them."
(Age 4, 15)

"I don't have anything (of theirs) to pass down to my children."
(Age 16)

"A parent's love and presence is a priceless memory that can bring strength, hope, and lessons of their own."
(Age 4, 15)



Let the child's memory of the deceased parent(s) live on, so love can live on.

- Allow the child to talk about the parent(s)
- Encourage the child to ask questions about the Parent(s)
- Let the memory of the loved one(s) be honored in a way that is comfortable for the child. For example, create a "Memory Box", a "Memory Shelf", including photos, mementos, possessions collected and perhaps displayed to celebrate the parents' life.
- Encourage them to write down in a letter to their parents what they want to say; often children don't get a chance to say goodbye.
- Help the child choose items of the parents to remember a parent(s), if they are very young (toddlers/infants) select several items for these children.

It is healthy for a child to cherish memories of the deceased parent(s). As the **Suddenly Responsible** adult, it is important to remember, that the child's loving memories for the parent(s), does not diminish feelings and appreciation for you. It is not possible for the **Suddenly Responsible** adult to replace a parent. A new bond, and love can grow between the child and the **Suddenly Responsible** adult, even though the child will always love and may long for the deceased parent(s). Being mindful and respectful of these feelings can actually make the **Suddenly Responsible** person closer to the child.

embrace and honor so your love lives on

Each child is special. Each circumstance is unique. Therefore, a child's reactions to the death of a parent(s) can vary tremendously. While research can find similarities and experts can make recommendations about how best to interact and communicate with a child, as the **Suddenly Responsible** adult, each situation is different. The tips indicated herein, are intended to be generalities, a starting point, with the goal of a smooth and secure transition and bond for the **Suddenly Responsible** adult and child.

Our suggestions:

- Embrace the situation and make the best of it. Honor the child and the feelings of the child.
- Listen to the child. Remember to ask questions about what makes the child happy and comfortable.

Remember, you are not alone. Our website suggests other resources and outlets. www.inlovingmemoryfoundation.org Other options for help include talking with someone who has been through this or enlisting the help of a professional.

"People need to know when asking questions that prying into my life is not appropriate. I hated it when teachers, parents of friends and anyone asked me "How did your parents die?" "Where did you live?" as if this was casual conversation. These are personal matters and you should not ask unless the information is being offered. It is unfair to make me relive the whole event at your whim and to disrupt a situation. I would be asked in the bleachers of a football game, in the hallway of school, between classes, or at dinner at a friends house."
(Age 13)



the fact is our commitment

One out of seven children in America, will lose a mother, father, or sibling before age ten.

Outreach Program

Our Information Outreach Program makes available literature and materials for use by individuals, families and organizations. Distributed to hospitals, community centers, schools, etc., such literature, video and other materials provide help with the grieving process of children. Since sensitivity, understanding and communication are key, our Information Outreach Program tools include tips on appropriate and helpful things to say and do when interacting with children who have had one or both parents die.

College Scholarships*

Our College Scholarship Program is being established to provide funds for children who have had both of their parents die before the child is 18 years of age and were not left funds for higher education.

Grant Program*

Our Grant Program will provide funds and resources to organizations specifically helping children through the grieving process of a parent(s) death.

*ILMF's goal is to have the money raised to offer these programs by 2010.



foundation

In Loving Memory Foundation is a special non-profit organization founded in 2001 and dedicated to helping children who have had one or both parents die. Created with love by Alison Flaum Souksamlane in memory of her parents, both of whom died by the time Alison turned 15 years of age.

Alison created this foundation, from her heart, to assist children who find themselves where she was, with parent's who have died and surviving people not knowing what to say or do, or saying and doing things that were hurtful. Alison's father died when she was 4 and her mother died when she was 15; she knows how an individual's words and actions can impact a child, how words and actions of care givers, teachers and others can help or can torment a child. This foundation, and this guide, is here to help future generations of children and their caregivers with life after the death of a child's parent(s).

In Loving Memory Foundation is supported by the generous donations of individuals, coporations, and organizations. Our hope is that this guide and our foundation's work are helpful to you and the people you love. Tax deductible contributions to our non-profit organization help to continue providing information and assistance to those who need it. In Loving Memory Foundation: 10004 Wurzbach #354, San Antonio, Texas 78230, (210)364-9414, www.inlovingmemoryfoundation.org.

*"When we moved in to live with them, everything was different, I now had to share a room, they drank whole milk and my Mom always bought skim milk, the rules of the house were different, I not only lost my Mom, but because I was moved to live with a relative, ... I lost my room, my friends, my school ... I lost everything in that one moment when my Mom died, even the money from all my birthdays and baby sitting because my savings account was in my Mom's name."
(Age 14)*

*"You can't control what happens to you, only what you do with it."
(Age 4 and 15)*

our founder



Alison Flaum Souksamlane
Founder and President

Alison's life story is both uplifting and inspiring. Through her life experiences, she has proven that love can live on—despite the most tragic of circumstances. Alison had both her parents die when she was young. Her father died when she was only 4 years old, and her mother died when she was only 15. With determination, perseverance, and passion, she developed into a successful businesswoman, wife, and mother.

From tragedy, a passion developed within Alison—a passion to assure that her parents' love for her would always live on. This passion developed into a mission. She is the founder of In Loving Memory Foundation, and now seeks to help children whose parents have died so they may not merely survive but thrive and enjoy a productive, healthy, and secure future. Alison's childhood experiences fuel her passion to protect families from life's obstacles and create legacies for future generations.

Married to Tommy Souksamlane in 1998, they had their first child in 2004, "Mickey", named in loving memory of Alison's father.

our inspiration



Barbara and Milton "Mickey" Flaum
Our founder's parents

Imagine what you would want for your child, in the event of your death or the death of your spouse. **In Loving Memory Foundation** is inspired by the wish for your child to be embraced and cared for, to allow for a healthy, positive, and secure future.

In Loving Memory Foundation is inspired by the need to assure that **Your Love Lives On**.

so your lov
so your love
lives on

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tips

Things to think about when talking to children about the death of a loved one:

- What is their age and maturity level?
- What is their past experience with death?
- Were they close to the person who died?
- What is the child's understanding of death?
- How did the death occur? What were the circumstances?
- What is the family's religious and cultural beliefs about death?

Tips on how to talk to children about death:

- The key is listening to the child. Silence can be the right answer.
- Be available to answer questions.
- Ask the child about their understanding of death, then share with them your understanding.
- Clarifying misconceptions and correcting misunderstandings is very important.
- Give clear information. Remain factual, avoid opinions.
- Do not talk down to kids, and do not ignore them.
- Do not tell them or expect them to take on adult roles.
- Do not presume that you know how the child feels, ask them how they feel.
- Allow teens to choose whether or not to attend the funeral or help with the planning of it.
- Discuss with them decisions about the future, ask for their input.
- Do not say that it will be o.k. or that they will "get over it".
- Explain what is happening to them in a simple factual manner.
- Tell them it is o.k to cry, be angry, sad, or fearful and it's o.k. to enjoy the rest of their life.
- Do not use words like "sleep", "lost", or "journey" to explain death.
- Let them show how they feel through play and in their actions.
- Behaviors often mirror how the child is feeling inside. Let them be sad or angry; kids often need to draw, play, dance, play a sport to relax, release energy and feelings, or have something they can control, so let them do so. They are not doing it to be disrespectful.
- Use the name of the person who died. This helps them acknowledge the death and remember the person.
- Remember the death of a loved one is a traumatic and life altering event.
- Be respectful and don't ask questions at random, in public places, or for your own curiosity.
- Do not try to be their mom or dad, just be who you are.
- Avoid saying "I am the mother of the house now", and do not imply that child is your child or that you can be their mom.

