

## 5. Is it my responsibility to take care of the family now?

Children receive many messages that it is their responsibility to take care of the family after a parent has died. They hear, from friends, relatives, and the culture at large, variations on "You're the man (the woman) of the house now."

It is probably true that the child will have to help out more; they may have to do things now that they didn't have to do before (and talking about the specifics can be helpful). But the child remains a child. Parents are adults, capable of handling many responsibilities that children (even adolescents) are not yet able to manage. Working out expectations with the child is important so that they are not left with the weight of a responsibility that they don't have the inner resources to cope with.

## Beyond the Questions

We can't answer these questions for anyone else. But we can create a safe place for the child to ask, and to explore their own answers to, these questions. We can see these questions, not as requests for information, but as the tentative reaching out of a hand in need of support.

The questions are hard. But they are also opportunities we can use to further connect with the child. They are doors that we've been invited to enter, and once inside, to affirm the child through listening to what they have to say, rather than telling them what we want to say. These questions are a chance to validate the child in a very confusing and scary time. Now more than ever, our presence is more important than our knowledge. Remember, the fact that a child asking us these or any number of other hard questions is a sign of their trust in us. We have the privilege and the responsibility to respond to the gift of that trust—to the gift of that child himself or herself.

## ABOUT THE HIGHMARK CARING PLACE...

The Caring Place is dedicated to children and their families who have experienced the death of a family member.

The Caring Place is a safe place with safe people where children and families can know that they are not alone in their grief, share their feelings and experiences in an atmosphere of acceptance, see that what they are going through is normal, and know that hope and healing are possible.

**This brochure is one of a four-part series on questions children ask.**



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# Questions Grieving Children Ask

*Is it my fault?*

*Is it my responsibility to take care of the family now?*

*Who will die next? And who will take care of me?*

*Why did this happen to me?*  
*Why did they die?*

*"In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers."*

— FRED ROGERS

Honorary Chairman of the Caring Place from its inception until his death in 2003.

## Questions Grieving Children Ask, and How You Might Respond To Them

In responding to questions, we need to remember that supporting and affirming the child is more important than providing answers.

It is important for a grieving child to get a sense from us that it is OK to ask these questions, that we are not shocked or upset or angry that they are dealing with these hard things.

To support a grieving child asking difficult questions, we can say things like:

- “What you are thinking (or feeling) is normal.”
- “You are OK.”
- “It’s natural (or normal) to feel that way.”

What we don’t want is to minimize their feelings by saying things like this:

- “You shouldn’t feel like that.”
- “Don’t worry.”
- “That’s silly.”

It’s very common not to know what to say in answer to some of these questions. What we could say when we don’t know what to say:

- “I don’t know. I’ve often wondered about that myself. (Let’s talk about it).”
- “Tell me more about how you are feeling (or what you are thinking).”
- We can also repeat back to the child what they said, in our own words.

**“What the child seeks is often not answers, but reassurance.”**

### 1. Who else will die? Who will die next?

What the child seeks through this question is often not answers, but reassurance.

The factually correct answer to the question is that anyone *could* die at any moment. The child already knows that. What she needs is evidence that in the midst of this terrifying knowledge that she is not alone. She needs someone’s presence with her. The grieving child needs to know that she is not alone in this world.

Oftentimes, this question is immediately connected with the following question.

### 2. Who will take care of me?

“If Dad could die, then Mom can die too. And if Mom dies, then *who will take care of me?*”

This question is among those that we hear most often at the Caring Place. The fear and anxiety woven into it is clear—that the child will be left alone, helpless in the world.

If one parent has died, and the child asks this of the surviving parent, what can you say? The child needs reassurance most of all. None of us can honestly say, “I will never die.” And yet to answer on the simple factual level—“We could all die at any time.”—could well compound the fear that already exists.

Although we can’t truthfully say that we will never die, we can speak truthfully about our intentions. We can say, “I intend to be here with you until you are all grown up and you have your own kids and I am old. **I intend to keep you safe. I intend to take care of you.**” That reassurance is what the child seeks, and needs.

### 3. Why?

This most difficult-to-answer question is also one of the most common questions we all have. Why did they die? Why did this happen to me? Why?

To connect with, to validate, the anguish behind this question, we might say something like,

“That’s a good question that I have wondered about myself and that I don’t know the answer to. Nobody knows for sure why people die. What we do know is that when someone we love dies, it breaks our heart.”

### 4. Is it my fault?

It is so painful for an adult to hear a child ask this question. It is painful to think of the guilt that this question reflects.

A natural reaction is to quickly to remove the question, as if that removes the underlying guilt as well. “No!” we’re tempted to say immediately. “Of course not. It’s not your fault.”

But guilt feelings are very common after a death. The child will likely have heard others tell them that it was not their fault, and they will have likely discounted those statements. The feelings of guilt are real. Instead of shutting them down, it is important to try to help the child open up more and talk about those feelings, and for us to listen with all our heart.

“This is a question,” you might say, “that many people ask themselves when someone they love dies.” And you might go on, reflecting the child’s statements with your own statements like:

- “It feels like it was your fault.”
- “You’re probably wondering — *What if I had (or hadn’t)...* — *If only I had (or hadn’t)...*”
- “It sounds like you’d like to do some things differently if you could.”

It’s hard to see a child in pain. And this question is a reflection of the pain they feel.

***We can’t take them out of the valley of grief. But we can walk with them in their valley.***