

## Writing a Condolence Note to a Grieving Child or Adolescent By Helen Fitzgerald, CT

Writing a condolence note to an adult is challenging enough, but how about writing one to a child or a teenager? Traditionally, condolence notes have been seen as expressions of sympathy toward adults, with an occasional reference to "the children." Yet, a child suffering the loss of a parent or sibling is likely to be in great need of personal attention. An adult who recognizes this can make a lasting impression by writing a personal note to that child.

In the commercial world, it is easy to find sympathy cards for adults, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to find appropriate cards for children or adolescents in mourning. You may create your own card by writing a personal condolence message that is appropriate for the age of the child.

### BEFORE YOU START

Before you start, identify the age of the child you are writing to, so that you can create an appropriate message. You will want to be careful not to leave the impression that you are talking down to the child.

Find out about the nature of the relationship the child had with the deceased. Was this a parent, sibling, or grandparent? What kind of relationship did they have?

Finally, keep in mind the cause of death and what the child may or may not know about it, especially if the death was sudden or violent. It may be best not to address the cause of death but rather to write about your relationship with that person, recalling pleasant memories.

When you set pen to paper, you may be tempted to use one or more clichés that one hears all the time. Here are some to avoid:

- **"It's part of God's plan."** What plan? God planned to have a child's father shot in a bank robbery or a mother die in a car accident? This can leave a child angry, confused and disappointed in God.
- **"God so loved your sister that he has taken her to live with him."** This can not only leave a child feeling angry with God but also not wanting to be so good that God might choose her next.
- **"She's in a better place."** Meant to be reassuring, this can leave a young child confused by unanswerable questions: Where is this place? What's it like there? Why doesn't anybody know anything about it? Can we visit her? Or: I want to die so I can go there too.

More clichés to weigh carefully or avoid altogether:

- **"I know how you feel."** No one ever knows exactly how another person feels. If you have had a similar experience, it might be good to share it with the child. Such as: "My dad died when I was about your age." In such a case, you might even go on to talk about what helped you then.
- **"He's at peace now."** This is another example of a hollow, and perhaps even painful, statement that would be less than helpful if the child you're writing to had been at odds with the father who died.
- **"You are the man of the house now and you need to be strong."** Statements like this can rob a child of his grief, leaving him scared and vulnerable, wondering what it is he is supposed to do now.

*A note of caution:*

Be careful not to create a "saint" out of the deceased. While it's fine not to speak ill of the dead, you may do more harm than good by excessively and unrealistically praising that person. This can create uncomfortable feelings in a grieving child or adolescent. If the deceased was a sibling, there may have been some rivalry with old unresolved issues or even guilt from past disputes. The same process could be at work if the deceased was a parent with whom the child was at odds.

## GETTING STARTED

Starting is usually the hardest part; it is like an artist facing a blank canvas. Once that first brush stroke of paint has been applied, the picture begins to take shape. The following phrases may be helpful to you in getting started:

- **"I'm so sorry to hear that your father has died"** may be all you need to start your message.
- **"You and your family are in my thoughts and prayers"** will work if it's true.
- **"I will miss your mother; she touched my life in so many ways"** is a good opening for writing about ways that she touched your life.
- **"There are times like this that I really don't know what to say."** Since this is probably quite accurate, it won't hurt saying so, but go on trying anyway.
- **"He was such a creative (or funny, or generous) person, and I am so sorry he died."** This works whether it is a parent, sibling or friend who died. Addressing the qualities of the person who died will enable you to reveal indirectly how highly you valued that person.

*Telling stories:*

No matter how you start, tell some stories of what you and the deceased did together. This is especially important for children and adolescents. Those in mourning want to hear stories about their loved ones, especially if it is a parent. They want to see the deceased through the eyes of other adults. After all, this is their heritage; this is who they are. Try to think of things that the child or adolescent will want to know about the relative who died.

*Endings are important as well:*

Here are a few suggestions for ending your condolence note:

- **"My love and support will always be here for you."**
- **"I know you have a little league game on Saturday. If you would like, I will take you.** Talk this over with your mother and I will call tomorrow to see what you have decided."
- **"I will keep you in my prayers."**

*Some additional thoughts for different age groups:*

- **First grade and younger:** Since these children are early readers, you might want to consider printing your message or, if you are typing it on the computer, using a larger type.
- **Elementary school-age children:** Add photos and tell stories. Consider offering to help develop a "memory wall" of pictures and stories.
- **Middle and high school-age children:** Be careful not to talk down to these young adults. Let them know if you are available when they need anything. A teenager once said a friend of his father had told him, "I'm here for you" and that this was the best thing anyone could do for him.

Difficult as they are to write, condolence notes provide us with an opportunity to convey our love and friendship to others of greatest need. Grieving children need our support and attention, and a personal card designed for the right age level is a gift that will be welcomed and appreciated.

**Note:** For interactive booklets to send to children of all ages, visit the American Hospice Foundation's [Grief at School Articles](#) page.