

Helping children when a parent or other relative is sentenced to death or executed

A guide for caregivers and helpers

When someone in a family is sentenced to death or is executed, it hurts everyone — including the children. Maybe this is happening in your own family. Maybe you are a social worker or another person helping a family like this. This guide is for you.

Children of all ages feel it when a family member is sentenced to death or executed. This guide is about children because they can be hurt in ways that are easy to miss. Children need the adults around them to help them feel safe, to notice when something is wrong, and to help them cope.

We say “*a parent or other relative*” because children are also affected when it is a brother or sister, a cousin, an aunt or uncle, or a grandparent. The ideas in this guide can help in all of these cases.

It can be hard to see how much a child is hurting. Maybe the adults are full of their own fear and sadness. Maybe the child has not said they are worried, so the adults think the child is fine. Maybe it feels too dangerous to talk about what is happening. Maybe you feel it is better to protect the child by staying quiet, or that there is no time to stop and think about feelings.

These worries make sense. But children — even the youngest ones — feel the stress too. When you take small steps to help a child cope, you make the pain a little softer. And you help the whole family feel that some things are still in your hands.

How a child might show they are hurting

Children cannot always put their feelings into words. And in a hard time like this, a child may stay quiet because they do not want to add to the adults’ worries. But even when a child says nothing, they are still telling you something — often through the way they act.

You might notice that the child:

- has trouble paying attention
- stops doing things they used to enjoy
- has trouble sleeping or eating
- keeps thinking or talking about the family member who is gone
- acts as if they do not care at all

Adults sometimes see this as bad behavior or a bad mood. But often it is grief, fear, or confusion. It is the child’s way of saying: “This is too much for me. I need help.”

How you can help

Here are some things children need at a time like this, and simple ways you can help.

Children need the truth, in words they can understand

You may want to hide the truth to protect the child. But children usually feel that something bad is going on. If no one explains, they make up their own reasons — and these are often worse than the

truth. A child might think, “My father went away because I was bad.” If a child feels the adults are hiding things, they may stop trusting them.

Tell the child the truth in a simple way. Say calm words again and again, and let the child ask questions any time. You can say:

“This is what is happening. It is not your fault. You are not alone. You can always come to me with your questions.”

Children need to feel safe

Let the child know that the adults still love them and will keep them safe, no matter what.

Keeping the same daily routine helps a lot. You might think it is kinder to drop all the usual rules right now. But children feel safer when life still has a shape they know. As much as you can, keep the same times for sleep, meals, and school.

Other simple things can help a child feel safe and close to you:

- singing or dancing together
- playing together, and giving the child their own time to play
- drawing together, and asking the child about their drawing
- holding the child close, if that is what they want

Children need help to name and share their feelings

Try to let the child feel and show whatever they feel — sadness, fear, anger, all of it.

When a parent suddenly goes away, a child may feel left behind. At the same time, they may feel proud of the parent, or worried about them. A child may still love a relative and miss them, even when other people in the family are angry at that person. Both feelings are normal.

What hurts a child is not the feeling itself. What hurts is being told — in words, or by the way adults act — that the feeling is wrong. Simple words help:

“It makes sense that you are scared.”

“It is okay to be angry at someone you love.”

“I know you are sad that [name] is not here with you.”

One caution: it is good for a child to see that you are sad or scared too, but only a little. Do not use the child to pour out your own worries. Do not ask the child to “be strong for everyone.” This is easy to do with older children and teenagers, because they can seem grown-up. But they still need care, support, and safety, just like younger children.

Children need simple ways to calm their body

When fear or worry grows too big, a child feels it in their body — a racing heart, a tight chest, or a sore tummy. Simple “grounding” activities help the child feel calm and safe again. You can do them together, and it helps to practice them at quiet times too, so they are easy to use when things feel hard.

- Breathe slowly together. Breathe in while you count to four, and out while you count to four. You can pretend to blow up a balloon, or gently blow out candles.

- Notice the world around you. Ask the child to name five things they can see, four they can touch, three they can hear, two they can smell, and one they can taste.
- Feel the ground. Ask the child to press their feet into the floor and feel it holding them up.
- Hold something comforting. A soft toy, a smooth stone, or a warm cup can help a child feel steady.
- Move the worry out. A short walk, a big stretch, or a slow dance can help.

Children need to choose about phone calls and visits

Some children want to talk on the phone with the relative in prison. Others do not — maybe they want to see the person's face and cannot feel close on the phone. Some children want to visit; some do not. A child may want to visit one time and not another time. All of this is okay.

Visiting a relative in prison is hard for any child. It can be harder when the relative is on death row, because guards may treat the family badly. If you take a child to visit, learn as much as you can ahead of time about what the visit will be like. Even when the child chooses to go, they need to know what to expect, and they need your care before, during, and after the visit.

For some children, visiting is not safe at all — for example, if the relative hurt them in the past. In that case, it is right to protect the child and not take them.

Children need to choose about speaking out in public

Sometimes families ask people to help stop an execution. A child might be asked to show their face, use their voice, or take part in a campaign.

Be very careful with this. A child might truly want to help, and that can be okay. But never make a child feel used. And never let a child feel that it is their job to save their parent's life. A child should never feel that their parent lives or dies because of how well they did.

Children need ways to remember, after a death

If the relative has been executed, help the child find their own way to remember them. This might be through drawing, writing, music, or a ceremony.

Let the child take part in mourning if they want to. Some families gather to remember the person after a set number of days, or visit the grave together — let the child join if they wish. If you do not know where the person is buried, you can still make your own way to remember them together. You could keep a photo, plant something, or take a quiet moment to say the things you loved about them.

Children need to be themselves, not only “the child of...”

Help the child hold on to who they are, apart from the family member on death row. A child is much more than “the son of the man on death row” or “the sister of the person who was executed.” Help the child keep their own friends, their own interests, and the things they are good at.

Children need the adults at school to understand and help

School can be a place where a child feels normal and safe — or a place where they feel watched and judged. It helps a great deal when you and the child's teacher understand the situation in the same way.

If you feel it is safe to do so, talk with a teacher you trust. You do not need to share every detail. Together you can agree on simple things: how much the other children need to know (often very little), what to say if someone asks, and who the child can go to at school when they feel upset.

Ask the teacher to watch for bullying and to step in early. Children in this situation are sometimes teased or left out. A teacher who understands can protect the child, keep an eye on how they are coping, and let you know if something changes.

Children need to be protected from blame and shame

Sometimes children in this situation are treated as if they did something wrong themselves. Other children — and even adults — may whisper, point, or say unkind things. A child may be blamed for what their relative is accused of, as though they are the same person. This is deeply unfair, and it can make the child feel ashamed of who they are.

Keep a close eye on how the child is treated — at school, in the neighborhood, and within the wider family — and step in when you can. Remind the child, again and again, that they are not to blame for what a grown-up did, and that they are a good person in their own right.

Watch what the child sees online, too. Older children may come across hurtful comments, or news, photos, or videos about the case that upset them. Talk with the child about what they might find, help them keep away from harmful pages, and let them know they can always come to you if they see something that frightens or hurts them.

Match your help to the child's age

Children understand different things at different ages, so the way you help will change with the child.

- Very young children (under about four) understand very little of what is happening. They do not really know what “prison” or “death” means. But they still feel the stress around them and notice when someone is missing. What they need most is closeness, a steady routine, and gentle comfort.
- Younger school-age children can understand simple, true explanations, but may believe that what happened is somehow their fault. They need clear, calm words, repeated often, and plenty of reassurance.
- Older children and teenagers understand much more, and may follow the news or hear things from others. They can seem grown-up and capable — but they still need care and protection, not adult worries placed on their shoulders.

A word about teenagers

Adolescence is already a time when feelings pull in different directions. A teenager is working out who they are, and can feel one way one day and the opposite the next. When a parent is on death row or has been executed, these mixed feelings can grow even stronger and more confusing. A teenager might feel love and anger at the same time, want to be close to the family and also pull away, or grieve one moment and act as if they do not care the next. All of this can make grieving harder and last longer.

Let the teenager know that mixed and changing feelings are normal, and that they do not have to choose one feeling or explain themselves. Stay steady and there for them, even when they push you

away. And remember that, however grown-up they seem, they need your care and protection as much as a younger child does.

Children need adults who are cared for too

Children do best when the adults around them are steady and supported. Do not forget to take care of yourself. The more help you get for yourself, the more you can give to the child. Reach out to people you trust — family, friends, or a helper you can talk to.

About this Guide

This guide has been developed for public use through the collaboration of Iranian and non-Iranian professionals in the field of mental health and trauma: the After Violence Project (AVP), whose work includes a focus on the way the death penalty affects families and children; Children of Imprisoned Parents International (COIPI), which provides information and support regarding children with incarcerated parents; Dr. Koen Sevenants is a child and family mental health specialist who supports children of executed parents worldwide; a few other professionals in the field of trauma and its impact on children.