

HELPING CHILDREN WITH GRIEF

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- Understand the way you do your own grieving. It is said that grief is the price we pay for love. How do you grieve? Do you ignore your losses? Bury the feelings? Stay busy? Talk about them? Probably you will use the same method with your children. You may want to think about doing things differently with your children so that they can have a healthy experience.
- If you express your feelings and accept support when you need it, your children will learn from your behavior. We adults are important role models for our children.
- Accept and acknowledge the reality that grief hurts! Don't try to rescue the child or yourself from the pain hoping that it will go away. Child grief work is a healing process and it is work.
- At a time of the death and well beyond, children in grief may feel frightened, insecure, and helpless. They need love, support and structure in their daily routine. Firm, caring rules should not be abandoned. In fact, a routine provides that sense of security and stability in, what to the child may be, a crazy, scary and mixed-up world.
- When children experience a death it is common for them to think about it happening again, either to themselves or to another important person in their life. Especially in the case of one parent dying, they often question who will take care of them if the other parent dies.
- Children need information given to them that they will understand at their age level. They need an explanation of the cause of death using the words die and/or dead. In trying to protect our children, we may use vague terms like going away or asleep. This only adds to their confusion. Honesty is the best policy. Do not tell a child something he or she will have to unlearn. Children will sense it when something is not true and will be reluctant to trust an adult who they think is not being truthful.
- Listen to children's responses to your explanations as well as to the questions they ask. Ask them what they understood; ask for feedback about your explanations, especially with the older children; and ask them what they need. It is important to listen and respect their feelings and experiences.
- Do not close the door to doubt, questioning, and differences of opinion. People within the same family will have different ideas, attitudes and opinions about what happened. This is all right as long as people have the truth.

- Watch out for kids trying to protect grieving adults by assuming the caretaker role. Children in grief can be quite supportive. They also seem to know instinctively that the adults are suffering too and may be reluctant to make the adults suffer more by being sad themselves.
- Children will often need help in recognizing, naming, accepting, and expressing feelings. It is helpful to suggest physical or creative activities for a child who is in grief. For example, kicking boxes, tearing up paper, writing, painting, yelling, throwing dishes (preferably ones purchased at a garage sale!).
- Children can learn about death and grief prior to the actual death of a loved one, e.g. death of a pet -- how is this handled? Is the pain unbearable and the puppy replaced quickly? What does this teach the child about life and death?
- Share personal religious beliefs carefully. Children may fear or resent a God that takes to Heaven someone they love and need. This discussion within the family is very important so the children are not confused or frightened.
- Realize that a child's grief may be difficult to recognize. Feelings may be expressed more in behavior than in words. Helplessness, despair, fear, and anxiety may be acted out with aggressive behavior. Sometimes anger is directed at the safest person, often a surviving parent. It may not be conscious or rational but the child may feel that the parent should have prevented this tragedy. Talking about these feelings openly usually will mean that the child will work things out.
- Some children may go back to earlier behavior, such as thumb sucking, bed wetting, and clinging to parents. This is because the earlier time was a safe time, and when they feel safe again they will no longer feel the need to do these things.
- Anticipate and discuss possible strains on relationships with family and other children. Individual family members, and the family as a whole, most often are establishing a new identity without the person who died. The other children may be uncomfortable with your child now as they are forced to think about death when your child is around.
- Reassure children, especially younger ones, that they are not responsible for the person's death. All people die. Just as thoughts or words cannot bring the person back from death, so thoughts or words do not cause death.
- Parents need to know that once death is explained, it is not a closed subject. The topic will surface at very interesting times. Plus, grief lasts longer than anyone expects. Children continue to deal with grief as they grow and mature. Significant rites of passage, such as entering school, puberty or graduation, can be triggers for emotional reactions.
- It is a good idea to establish lines of communication with everyone involved with the child in grief. Keep each other informed; for instance, grief usually causes difficulty in concentrating so school work may be affected. The balance between understanding the effects of grief and setting realistic expectations should be discussed with teachers, caregivers and other family members.
- Recognize the importance of rituals. Rituals allow you to channel your feelings and thoughts into an activity. They can make your feelings more manageable. It is often helpful to plan something at significant dates, like during a holiday season or

on a birthday. Rituals can take several forms and can be done individually or as a family. For example, hanging a special ornament, lighting a candle, or setting aside a special time to remember.

- Understand that you can't hide feelings from children, no matter what you say, so don't worry about saying the 'right' words.
- Understand that clichés can be very hurtful. Don't find something good about the death, e.g. "Aren't you glad Mommy doesn't hurt anymore?" "Isn't it wonderful that God's love was shared at the funeral?"
- Understand that children may have intense grief. To underestimate their grief is not honoring their grief.
- Know that some children in grief cry and some don't. Both may be equally affected. Tears are not always necessary with grief.
- Honor the child's feelings of pain and loss. Trying to protect the child from feelings of pain and loss doesn't allow them to feel comfortable with you. They know they have the feelings but cannot express them freely around you.
- Know that the child will respond to the loss. And please don't assume the child will respond to the loss like you have. Each grief journey is unique.
- Give the child the time they need to grieve in their own way. Please don't push the child to talk about it. A child will tell us how he feels in the way he is able and it's usually through his behavior.
- Have the courage to show your feelings in front of the child. Sometimes adults are reluctant to cry in front of the child. Tears give the child permission to be real, too.
- Include the child in the family sadness. Please don't shut the child out by sending him to the babysitter or to watch a movie.
- Let the child grieve a dead pet before replacing it with another pet.
- Understand that children can only handle bits and pieces of grief at a time. A child may not always want to talk about death.
- Understand that children in grief cannot take over the role of the either of their parents. Please don't say, "Now you're the man or woman of the house."
- Understand that children are wise in the ways of grief. They seem to know that showing their pain or suffering may add to their parents suffering so may keep their own grief hidden. Please don't allow the child to assume the role of emotional caregiver to the parents.
- Know that when people are grieving, sometimes their appetite disappears for a while. Don't worry about the child's poor appetite. Give plenty of liquids.
- Tell the child the truth about their loss - that it may always hurt to think about the person who dies but that it will gradually hurt less.

- Understand that children are concrete thinkers. Using abstract language to soften the death is confusing to children. Instead of saying, "Grandpa passed away," say, "Grandpa died." They may not know what passing away means.
- Tell the truth about the possibility of your own death. Don't promise that you won't die. You can say, "I think I will live until I am very, very old but no one knows for sure."
- Treat the child in grief like you treat the other kids. Please don't single out a grieving child for special privileges in a school or church setting. Kids usually don't want to be seen as different or weird.
- Say the person's name, for example: "I know your Grandpa died and I'm sure you miss him very much." Please don't be afraid to initiate talking about the death.
- Tell the truth. 'I don't know' is a good answer to 'why' questions.
- Maintain structure, rules, limits. This provides security when children know that some things have not changed.
- Touch, hold, or hug but always with the child's permission.
- Save special items from the person, such as a collection or a piece of clothing, to give the child later.
- Share your faith if it is appropriate for your family. Talk about what your beliefs are on what happens after death.
- Be a good role model. Cry in front of the child. "I miss Grandma."
- Talk about loss and death before a significant death occurs, if possible. Visit a cemetery; use nature, (e.g. a dead bird) for discussion.
- Give the child a choice about going to the funeral but explain what will happen there first. If he is under 8 years old, take along an adult who can leave with him at anytime.
- Tell the child he did not cause the death by his angry thoughts. Try to find out what the child thinks happened by asking them to tell you.
- Recognize children express grief physically by yelling, pounding or running it out.
- Allow children in grief to select the play activities they need to work through their grief.
- Encourage the child to express his feelings through drawings and other creativity.
- Give the child something to do. It will combat his helplessness. For example, he can plant a memory tree, write a story, or take flowers to the grave.
- Read children's books which deal with loss so the child knows his feelings are normal.

- Use third-person language when talking to children. It is less threatening. Say, "Many children feel..." instead of "Do you feel...?"
- Look through photo albums with the child at pictures of the person who died.
- Talk about the loss whenever the child brings up the subject and answer only what is asked. Let the child be in charge of what he is ready to hear.
- Expect children to regress somewhat. They may cling to you, be afraid of the dark or wet the bed. Rocking and night-lights are fine.
- Tell the child the exact cause of death "Grandma's heart wouldn't work anymore."
- Avoid running away by selling the house and moving; taking a long trip, etc. Children in grief need security in their lives after they have experienced a significant loss.