

Helping Children Cope with Grief

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When Someone Loved Dies

Adults grieve. So do children. As an adult or child, experiencing grief means to “feel,” not just to “understand.” Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve. Even before children are able to talk, they grieve when someone loved dies. And these feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever. Caring adults, whether parents, relatives or friends, can help children during this time. If adults are open, honest and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for children to learn about both the joy and the pain that comes from caring deeply for other people.

Talking About Death to Children

Adults sometimes have trouble facing death themselves. So, open, honest discussions about death with children can be difficult. Yet adults who are able to confront, explore and learn from their own personal fears about death can help children when someone loved dies. As a result, children can form “a healthy attitude toward both life and death. When a death occurs, children need to be surrounded by feelings of warmth, acceptance and understanding. Caring adults can provide this support.

A Caring Adult’s Role

How adults respond when someone loved dies has a major effect on the way children react to the death. Sometimes, adults don’t want to talk about the death, assuming that by doing so children will be spared some of the pain and sadness. However, the reality is very simple: children will grieve, anyway. Adults who are willing to talk openly about the death help children understand that grief is a natural feeling when someone loved had died. Children need adults to confirm that it’s all right to be sad and to cry, and that the hurt they feel now won’t last forever. When ignored, children may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. Worse yet, they feel all alone in their grief.

Encourage Questions about Death

When someone loved had died, adults need to be open, honest and loving. Patiently, they need to answer questions about the death in language children can understand. Adults shouldn’t worry about having all the answers. The answers aren’t as important as the fact that they’re responding to the questions in a way that shows they care. Children may repeat the same questions about the death again and again. It’s natural. Repeating questions and getting answers helps them understand and adjust to the loss of someone loved.

Establish a Helping Relationship

Respond to children with sensitivity and warmth. Be aware of voice tone; maintain eye contact when talking about the death. What is communicated without words can be just as meaningful to children as what is actually said. Let children know that their feelings will be accepted. Although some of their behavior may seem inappropriate, adults need to understand children during this stressful time, not judge their behavior or criticize. Children need to know

that adults want to understand their point of view. This commitment tells a child, “You’re worthwhile; your feelings will be respected.”

Sharing Religious Beliefs with a Child

Adults often wonder if they should share with children their religious beliefs regarding death. This is a complex issue; no simple guidelines are available. Keep in mind that adults can only share with children those concepts they truly believe. Any religious explanations about death must also be described in concrete terms; children have difficulty understanding abstractions. The theological correctness of the information is less important at this time than the fact that the adult is communicating in a loving way.

Allow Children to Participate

Create an atmosphere that tells children that their thoughts, fears and wishes will be recognized when someone loved dies. This recognition includes the right to be part of planning the arrangements for the funeral. Although children may not completely understand the ceremony surrounding the death, being involved in the planning of the funeral helps establish a sense of comfort and the understanding that life goes on even though someone loved has died. Since the funeral of someone loved is a significant event, children should have the same opportunity to attend as any other member of the family. That’s “allowed” to attend, but not “forced.” Explain the purpose of the funeral: as a time to honor the person who has died; as a time to help, comfort and support each other and as a time to affirm that life goes on. Viewing the body of someone loved who has died can also be a positive experience. It provides an opportunity to say “goodbye” and helps children accept the reality of the death. As with attending the funeral, however, seeing the body should not be forced.

Growing Through Grief

Grief is complex. It will vary from child to child. Caring adults need to communicate to children that this feeling is not one to be ashamed of or something to hide. Instead, grief is a natural expression of love for the person who died. As a caring adult, the challenge is clear: children do not choose between grieving and not grieving; adults, on the other hand, do have a choice- to help or not to help children cope with grief. With love and understanding, adults can guide children through this vulnerable time and help make the experience a valuable part of a child’s personal growth and development.

Suggested Guidelines Concerning Children and Grief

Be a good observer. See how each child is behaving. Don’t rush in with explanations. Usually, it’s more helpful to ask exploring questions than to give quick answers. When someone loved dies, don’t expect children’s reactions to be obvious and immediate. Be patient and be available. Children are part of the family, too. And reassurance comes from the presence of loving people. Children feel secure in the care of gentle arms and tenderness. When describing the death of someone loved to a child, use simple and direct language. Be honest. Express your own feelings regarding the death. By doing so, children have a model for expressing their own feelings. It’s all right to cry, too. Allow children to express a full range of feelings. Anger, guilt, despair and protest are natural reactions to the death of someone loved. Listen to children, don’t just talk to them. No one procedure or formula will fit all children, either at the time of death or during the months that follow. Be patient, flexible and adjust to individual needs. Adults must recognize their own personal feelings about death. Until they consciously explore their own concerns, doubts, and fears about death, it will be difficult to support children when someone loved dies.

Seven Ways to Guide Children Through Grief

1. **Always tell the truth. Explain what happened and why, using simple direct language.** Use the correct words: people die, are dead, and were killed. Be sure to provide some information on why the death happened or children may fill in any blanks with creative connections. Children without facts are more likely to blame themselves for causing or contributing to the death.
2. **Let children know that the emotions they are experiencing are normal.** Grief is more than sadness. Adults and children feel anger, fear, confusion, guilt and relief, as well as sadness, when someone dies. These feelings are not good or bad. They're just normal.
3. **Let children's action as well as their words guide you to what they are feeling.** Children, especially your ones, will express a lot of their fear, anger and sadness through behavior. They may be withdrawn, hyperactive, clingy, destructive, and might feel physically sick sometimes. Many children temporarily regress to how they behaved at a younger age. Actions may be their only way to tell caregivers, "I'm mad, I'm worried, I'm scared, I'm confused, I'm hurt."
4. **Help children understand the behavior of adults around them.** Children may be confused by changes in behavior and the variety of reactions they see in adults around them. Uncle John might be angry, Aunt Jane constantly tearful, and Grandpa silent and withdrawn. Young children, in particular, need to know that it is not their behavior that is causing the upset.

5. **Protect children's rights to be and remain children.** Do not allow or encourage children and adolescents to step into adult roles because of the loss. Grieving children need routines, structure and discipline so their world can stay as normal as possible. Children and teens do not lose their need to socialize and have fun. They can be grieving hard one minute and playing hard the next. This does not mean that they do not care. Children want to fit in as soon as possible.

6. **Allow children to participate in the rituals of saying good-bye.** Funerals are for the whole family. Children should be given the choice of whether they attend services after they have been given very clear detailed descriptions of what to expect. Smaller children should be included for short periods of time and someone should be available to answer questions and move small children on to their next activity. Children who are not allowed to go to funerals will wonder what was so horrible that they couldn't see it, or will get the message that they are not important enough, or competent enough to be included.

7. **Know when to get help.** A question parents often have is, "How do I know if my child needs professional help?" Any kind of extreme behavior is an obvious red flag. These behaviors include suicide threats, serious destructive acts toward people, property or animals, frequent episodes of panic, and drug or alcohol abuse. Other changes that probably warrant evaluation are an inability or unwillingness to socialize, a significant decline in schoolwork, or continued denial (in words or behavior) that the death happened. Young people may also need assistance if they had a difficult relationship with the person who died. Sometimes there is confusion surrounding the death—misinformation, lies, or a delay in notification and this may place the young person at risk of coping poorly. A child who is feeling a sense of responsibility for the death, or events leading to the death needs individual support.