

“ Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss”

It is very hard for adults to successfully cope with loss, and even harder to know how to help our children work through the process of grieving. One successful adaptation to loss effects another and makes the next one easier to cope with. The “bottom line” for children is that they need to know that they will still be cared for and kept safe.

There are four psychological components in helping children deal with grief:

1. **Understanding what happened.** Sort out realities by asking children “what do you think happened?” Also, provide a truthful definition of death. Terms like “passed away,” “6 feet under”, “went to sleep”, “we lost him”, “went to heaven”, or “angels came down and took him away” are all incorrect and may create fears for children. Instead, use the word “died” and explain what it means, and that it is permanent. With very young children, talking about what people *can’t* do once they have died may help them to understand. You can provide a simple, truthful account of what happened. And wait for your child to ask additional questions if they have any. For example, “Uncle Willy’s body totally stopped working. *His goodness will live in our hearts forever.*”

- 2) **Recognize their developmental stage and help them cope appropriately.** All children are stressed by loss and death, and many will regress under stress.
 - Infants and young Toddlers can’t express their feelings in words, but may show regressive behavior including: bed-wetting, eating jags (refusal to eat or wanting to eat a lot of comfort foods), crying, whining, clinging, etc.
 - Pre-schoolers often view death as reversible, and believe loved ones can come back, as if they were on a trip. You can help them by being very concrete – “outsides go down into the earth, insides go up” (share your spiritual beliefs here.)
 - Latency (6-8 years) – Young children see death as irreversible and final, but not necessarily universal . They believe death happens to the old and infirm, but may have a hard time understanding that children can die. Their sense of safety and security becomes an issue - if Billy’s dad died, so could mine! The best answer – “Yes, everyone will die someday, but not for a very, very, very long time.” Adults need to be protective, but still honest. **Never** say – “...but don’t worry about that.”
 - Pre-adolescents – Children at this age may stop asking questions because they know adults *don’t want* to talk about it. You need to **include them!** Because they have an adult understanding of death as irreversible and universal, and can understand the biology as well as the cause and effect, they may feel *they* are the cause and experience feelings of guilt. Asking them “Why do you think this happened?” really helps them make sense of their part. Children at this age love to ritualize and intellectualize death, so their thoughts are more available to them than their feelings. They may respond in a way which seems inappropriate or sarcastic “does this mean I have to wear a tie?”, or “I guess we can’t go rollerblading on Saturday now!”

- Adolescents – At this age, children see death as irreversible and universal, but also think it **will not** happen to them! They intellectualize death and want a philosophical justification. They might ask, “Why do bad things happen to good kids/people?” They might experience feelings of anger, and strike out at others or isolate themselves rather than ask for help or accept comfort from others. Death of a peer challenges all of their fantasies about immortality. It is very helpful for them to share the **why** of it, how they sort it out and make sense of it. A group discussion with their peers and a sensitive adult leader may be very helpful. We don’t need to have the answers, but we do need to dialogue about it.
- 3) **Kids need a safe places to grieve (physically and psychologically).** The bottom line for kids is that they need to know that they will always be cared for. They want to know what will be the same or different – tomorrow and the next day and the next. We must help children know what they can anticipate. How many details are really important to help them gain a sense of comfort - probably A LOT. For example, “for the next two days Uncle Joe will be staying here with us at night. Marjorie will be getting your breakfast, then you’ll go to school like always. After your basketball game, Jow will pick you up and we’ll all have dinner together. Then we’ll all have some quiet family time together before you go to bed.” Let children lead the discussion and ask as many questions as they have.

It is vitally important that there is at least one caring adult to share their pain with them. Ideally it is a parent, but if that is not possible, or the parent is too upset, another close, sensitive loving adult can fill that role. It is also important to understand that kids grieve over a longer period, and that their grieving may not match those of adults around them. As they grow developmentally, they will experience the sense of grief and loss in different ways, and may well have additional questions long after the initial loss occurred. Check in with them now and again, and always treat their thoughts and questions truthfully and respectfully.

- 4) **Devise a good vehicle for commemoration** – To help children work through their feelings, the use of drawings, poems, or an activity that mirrors their emotions may be helpful. Children can be comforted by rituals that keep the loved one a part of their lives. Lighting candles or assembling a display of photographs may provide a sense of healing and commemoration. One good friend that experienced the loss of her son shared, “The hardest thing is keeping him alive in my heart. I like to have people talk to me about him. I like to be around people that knew him well. Please remind me of the fun times we all had together, and his sweet but silly ways.”

Resource: Maria Trozzi, Brazelton Seminar, Cornell University, 1998.

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