

Helping Children Cope

Children of all ages are undoubtedly affected by *any* significant loss, and often very deeply, because their coping mechanisms are just developing. Everyone is usually rightly concerned about how death or a life-threatening situation will affect children.

Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve. It is very important to acknowledge that children *do* grieve, and should be encouraged to do so. Allowing them to express their grief helps make sense of overwhelming fears and anxieties that may be evoked by a death or other significant loss. Having their grief validated gives children the assurance that they are not alone in their experience, and that they will be OK.

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But we need to ask ourselves the following question to begin to understand the complexity of how the situation affects this child, and how we can offer support:

What does THIS loss mean to THIS child, at THIS time in his/her life?

When tragedy strikes, there is often anxiety about the impact upon, and the reactions of the children directly or indirectly involved. Many instinctively shield children from pain and sorrow. We try to keep them from upsetting situations. We leave them at home when we go to visit a sick or dying relative in hospital. We send them to a friend's house when we go to a funeral. We talk about death in hushed voices, rationalizing that "this would be too much for them" and "they are too young to understand." In fact they understand all too well.

Children, from a very young age, know when something is wrong. They hear what is said, and are sensitive to disruptions in the household. They feel the distress of their parents and others, and are deeply affected by it. And when they discern that something is a secret that is being kept from them, they arrive at unjustified conclusions. When we do not include children in the situation, or explain what is happening, we leave them to imagine the worst, and cope with their feelings alone. And sometimes, what they imagine is worse than reality.

Behaviors

The experience and expression of children may be different from adults, but it will

be no less painful or severe. Most children fear abandonment more than death. Children who feel isolated tend to fall back on regressive behaviors. Angry outbursts, irritability, changes in eating or sleeping patterns are common signs that a child is suffering. Because children believe in magic, they may believe that if they wish hard enough, the person will come back. Their anger is because they believe they were unable to reverse the effects of death.

Some may even believe they are responsible for death somehow, and struggle with guilt. Because children cannot differentiate between a wish and a deed, they may recall a moment when they wished a sibling would disappear, and rationalize that this wish has come true and they are to blame. Others may feel the person has “gone away” because they were bad, or unlovable.

- Watch your child at play. Observe how they act with dolls or toys, as this is often a clue to their feelings. Listen to the stories they make up in word or play. You can help by sharing stories and memories of the good times, and positive alternatives to any bad things they may remember.
- Often it may appear a child is “unaffected” by the news of a loss. This is because it takes a child a long time to “internalize” bad news. The hard questions may come up many months later. There are perhaps four central questions children express:
 1. Did I cause this person’s death?
 2. Does this mean I will die too?
 3. Are you (parents) going to die too?
 4. If you die, who will take care of me?
- Children tend to mourn little by little, bit by bit. They cannot do it in chunks. Sometimes they experience grief in other ways than sadness and tears. So a child may be upset one minute, and playing happily the next. They might act as if the death has not occurred, because the thought of the loss is overwhelming. They need to be allowed to process their grief in child-sized segments.

Children will need reassurance that they are not responsible. Some may mistakenly feel this has happened because they were naughty, or did not keep quiet as they were instructed. Remember, the child feels that death is controllable, so will make the false assumption that if they had done more, or behaved better, that this would not have happened. Most children need assurance of love, acceptance and feelings of security, and these needs are heightened in a time of crisis or loss.

The good news is, children can cope with most situations, provided they are given

appropriate choices, are prepared for what to expect, given opportunity to talk it through before and after, and are receive loving reassurances and support. Sharing the reality of what is happening allows children to understand, cope with, and integrate the experience of loss into their lives.

How to Assist Children to Cope with Grief

- It is important to note that children have many questions about death, and these are usually different than the ones that occur to adults. Children's questions deserve simple, straight forward answers. The first task of a grieving child is to make sense of the factual information about how the loss occurred. A caregiver's direct, concrete explanation of the facts surrounding the death will help the children begin to come to terms with what has happened. They may ask to hear the facts a number of times. They may also want to share the story with many others ... friends, teachers, strangers ... to try to comprehend the unimaginable that has happened.
- Children's perception of loss and their grief has to be understood according to their developmental levels, as we have seen above. Death, or indeed any loss, means different things to children of different ages. Enquire and try to figure out what this loss mean to *this* child at this particular time in life. What they feel they have lost will be a determinate of what they are missing, and what needs to be.
- Dispel any fears the child may have. Children are often afraid that someone else in the family, or they themselves will die also. They need to have reassurance that these fears are unfounded. Every child is afraid of being abandoned, so if one parent has died, the remaining parent can assure the child that he/she expects to live a long time, and will take care of all the child's needs.
- Children need to teach adults about their grief. Every child and every response is unique. Rather than assuming that we know what the child is feeling, we must allow the children to be our teachers. As children share their grief with others they trust, they tell us what they are feeling and experiencing. As adults communicate respect, acceptance, warmth and understanding, the child will sense that they are being taken seriously and be more open to the stabilizing presence of that individual as they reach out with meaningful support.
- Children express themselves in a variety of ways after a loss. Some of the most widely recognized include: an apparent lack of feelings; acting out

behavior, due to feelings of insecurity and abandonment and often expressed by behaviors which provoke punishment, for children would rather be punished than feel ignored; regressive behavior; fear; guilt and self blame; “Big Man” or “Big Woman” syndrome, (often encouraged by those who with good yet unwise intentions tell a 10 year old that he has to be the “*man* of the family”); disorganization and panic; loss and loneliness; explosive emotions.

- Simple ceremonies such as lighting a candle next to a photograph; placing a letter, picture or special memento in a casket; or releasing a helium balloon with a message attached for the person who died, can be effective rituals of farewell. Children can be wonderfully creative with these kinds of meaningful, symbolic ideas.
- Speak in simple language: Ask the child what he/she thinks, knows and feels, and respond specifically to these concerns. Do not give excessive detail, and make sure you check how the child is putting the information all together.
- Be honest. Avoid half truths. Never tell a child something he/she will later have to unlearn. Don’t avoid the word death, because sometimes the alternatives (asleep, gone away, in a better place, etc.) create worse difficulty in a child’s mind.
- Be open about the situation: When my wife died, my boys were 9 and 7 years of age. As much as I might have wanted to, there was no avoiding the questions that arose. “Why did Mommy die?” “Where is she now?” “What will we do if you die too?” I tried to answer the questions they asked simply and honestly, without giving too complicated responses. They discerned that I was making them a part of it all, and was being open about everything and accepted that.
- Initiate the conversation: Children may not ask questions because they are not sure if they will upset we adults. They may not know what to ask, or be able to put their uncertainties into words. They know that something unusual is happening, and are scared by it. Instead of asking questions, they may turn to whining or other negative behaviors, which add to your emotional stress. In response, rather than helping them cope, adults may get upset or angry and this adds to the reluctance to talk. Try to be sensitive to opportunities to ask children how they feel. We might ask, “You’ve probably been wondering about ”, and pose the question that the children may be asking.

- Sometimes our concern for the children can mask a deep need to resolve our own adult grief issues. Sometimes it is easier and more socially acceptable to say, “I am concerned about the children,” than it is to say, “I’m having a hard time dealing with this myself.” So be careful not to transfer your own fears and anxieties on to the children.
- Often a child may benefit from a support program. Talk to your doctor, spiritual leader or other community resource people to see what programs are available for your children.
- Above all, let the child know that these feelings of grief are natural and a necessary part of the grieving process and that their grief will pass. Assure them they are not alone, and that others, including you yourself, feel sad as well. Assure the child, however, that these feelings will pass with time, and that life will return to normal.
- A few practical guidelines:
 - When describing the death of a loved one, use simple direct language.
 - Be honest. Never teach a child something they will later have to unlearn.
 - Allow children to express all their emotions
 - Listen to children, don’t just talk to them
 - Don’t expect the child to react immediately. Be patient and available
 - Understand your own adult feelings about death and grief, for until we have come to terms with it for ourselves, it will be difficult to convey a positive attitude to children.

An important influence on children is watching how adults are responding. Caring adults can help guide children through this difficult time and make it a valuable part of personal growth and development. When you support children through these difficult life transitions, they will know without a doubt they are not alone. There is no greater gift we can give our children.