

Bereavement Package.....Children And Grief

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If you would like support or more information about the Parent's and Children Grief Support Groups, please telephone the Bereavement office at Victoria Hospice at 595-9715, Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Children And Grief.....General Comments

1. Introduction

Children do grieve differently than adults. Their developmental level is the key factor in determining their ability to understand and grieve a loss. Lacking adult tools of expression, children use their behaviours as a way of communicating their confusion and pain. The emotional intensity of the experience also means that they grieve sporadically rather than continually.

Initially they tend to regress to an earlier stage of development in order to create safety for themselves in a time of chaos. From this place of familiarity, they are able then to go on with their grief in a more appropriate way. They will need to re-grieve their losses with each new level of development.

How a child experiences and expresses his grief will depend on a number of other factors as well. These are applicable to all developmental levels:

- developmental level, age, gender
- general life experiences, specific loss experiences
- individual personality, coping style, adjustment
- family myths and attitudes about death
- family cultural background and current environment
- family communication, dynamics
- grieving styles of significant adults
- availability of support: adult, peer
- length of time since the death
- relationship with the person who died, as perceived by the child
- the nature of the loss or death; i.e. sudden, anticipated, violent circumstances
- preparation for the loss or death; i.e. information given, time for anticipatory grief, involvement

2. Children's Awareness of Death

Children are certainly aware of death. Listen to their songs and nursery rhymes, watch the games they play, read their comic books or watch Saturday morning cartoons and you will realize how often children are exposed to death. Unfortunately, the portrayal of death and the information conveyed is often inaccurate and based on fantasy rather than fact. This may complicate children's understanding throughout their early years.

Children have different ideas and meanings associated with death at the different ages and stages of their development. Each age period builds on the preceding one, with an increasing awareness of the full implications of death. This makes it important to give children additional information and opportunities to learn about death as they get older and approach developmental maturity.

Remember developmental guidelines are just that: children are individuals and their understanding and capabilities will vary with circumstances, learning styles and environment.

Children And Grief.....Helping Children Grieve

There are a number of strategies for helping children acknowledge and express their grief: thoughts, behaviours and feelings. However, in reviewing these don't lose sight of the most important component of all...

YOU

You are a person who cares, who reaches out to acknowledge their pain and wants to help. Your mistakes will be forgiven, your lack of knowledge forgotten when you are truly present for these children.

- **Self-Awareness**

Be aware of your own feelings and reactions to death or loss in general, and children and death in particular

Children learn to grieve from the attitudes, expressions and behaviours of the significant adults in their lives

- **Invite/Listen/Acknowledge**

Acknowledge the death and invite them to tell you about it

Give permission to grieve by sharing information, acknowledging reactions and feelings, providing opportunities for expression

Match their mode of expression in order to communicate and to provide safety

Acknowledge and allow their pain; don't overprotect or try to hurry them through it

Be gentle and reassuring

Your behaviour, attitude and comfort level is more important than anything you can say

Often, sitting quietly and listening is sufficient support

Give permission to grieve in ways that are appropriate and feel comfortable

Children And Grief.....

Misconceptions

They don't understand what has happened; they're too young.

Going to the funeral would just upset them.

I must protect them from loss and pain.

Children don't feel grief the same as adults.

When they have grieved once, it should be over.

I won't say or do the right thing, I must be in control to talk to them.

They won't want to talk about it.

I might upset them.

They need to keep busy.

Getting rid of reminders helps; encourage only good memories.

I won't mention it unless they do.

Once they've been angry or guilty that should be the end of it.

It is morbid to want to touch or talk about the body.

Use terms like 'passed away', 'gone to heaven'.

If they are not expressing grief, children aren't grieving.

I should tell them all the facts immediately.

Facts

Even the very young know when those around them are upset. Most understand more than adults realize.

Not being included in family rituals could be more upsetting. It helps to see how adults grieve.

All children do experience losses and need help in learning ways to deal with them.

Everyone grieves in his own way, depending on circumstances, developmental level and life experiences. This is usual and healthy.

As they develop, children must re-grieve losses in light of new understanding and abilities.

There are no right answers, only honest ones. Saying "something" acknowledges their grief, dispels fears and misunderstandings.

Let that be their choice, not yours. That's often all they do want to talk about.

They're already upset; that is a natural part of grieving.

Routine activities are important but new activities may be confusing. Not thinking about it delays grief.

This suggests it is wrong to think about the person who died or to have bad memories.

This suggests it is not alright to mention the person; that there is something bad about them or their death, that you don't care.

Grief is a "process" not steps, so the same feelings will surface repeatedly, as each aspect of the loss is realized.

This is normal for children. It is a good way to say good-bye and make the death real.

These are misleading, and will confuse and frighten children. "Dead" is better.

They may not know how to express feelings or know if they have permission to grieve. They may delay their grief to avoid upsetting others.

They may not be able to understand everything, or be able to handle the intensity of the situation. They will set the pace if allowed to.

Children And Grief.....Ages 3 - 5

Understanding of Death

Extremely egocentric and concrete: see death as a loss of love and protection, as abandonment (especially with a parent's death).

See death as a temporary departure or a separation: may look for the dead person to return later or may deny that they will not return. They find it difficult to understand the concept of finality.

May forget the person has died.

Connect death with the event(s) that precede it, in a cause and effect way; eg. going to hospital or being sick.

See some distinction between life and death, in that they associate life with movement and death with lack of movement. However, they may confuse death with sleep.

May attribute life to inanimate, moving objects.

Common Reactions

Feeling abandoned, overwhelmed and lonely

Denial, repression of facts

Regression in behaviours

Confusion about the circumstances of the death and a need to review it frequently.

Specific Requirements

Consistent repetition of the facts.

Simple explanations about whatever happens
eg. funerals, rituals, burial, the death.

Someone to support them and answer questions at high stress times
eg. following the death, funerals, visits to the cemetery.

Accurate, honest information at their level of understanding.

Discussing what the person who died can no longer do is helpful: eg. move, breath, eat.

Physical contact, calm and soothing tones, quiet times.

Continued reassurances: eg. about their future, about events prior to the death.

Consistent maintenance of usual routines and discipline.

Children And Grief.....Ages 6 - 8

Understanding of death

Have conflicting beliefs about death: they are beginning to grasp the reality of death yet are still caught up in some of the magical thinking that occurs at an earlier level of understanding. This results in a lot of confusion and misunderstanding.

Thinking can be both concrete and magical, eg:

- language is used and understood literally
- engage in wishful thinking "if only"
- first thoughts of life as being linear, with a beginning and an end
- see death as external and therefore avoidable (won't happen to them or their loved ones)
- may see death as a punishment (for the dead person or themselves)
- may see death as a result of old age
- personify death as monsters or the boogey man
- the concept of "life after death" is a contradiction of terms because death is seen as the end of life functions

Common Reactions

Ask a lot of questions, do research into the disease and death, focus on gory details.

Have fears: of being abandoned, of changes in their world, of more family deaths (themselves or their parents in particular).

Feel responsible for the death, for the family's future, for making family members happy.

Nightmares, restlessness, diarrhea.

Regression in behaviours and emotions; eg. bedwetting, thumb sucking, fears.

Specific Requirements

Information and explanations to be accurate and literal (no euphemisms) and only as much as they request. Explain death in terms of body functions eg. breathing, heart, brain. Relate it to any previous death experiences: eg. animal, person, nature.

Permission to decide their own level of involvement in rituals, funerals and gatherings; still may need a support person and models for appropriate grieving (want to be 'normal', but don't know how).

Information and reassurances about their grief reactions and feelings, their responsibility for the death and their future.

Encouragement to engage in concrete survival activities; eg. chores, play and exercise.

Opportunities to share their experiences with other grieving children.

Children And Grief.....Ages 9 - 12

Understanding of Death

Become less egocentric and develop social concerns; eg. wonder what impact death has on others.

Transition from concrete to more abstract thinking:

- understand the universality and inevitability of death, although it is still seen as removed in time from themselves
- can generalize about death and understand its magnitude
- begin to believe that it can happen to anyone and struggle with this

See death clinically (i.e. resulting from internal causes) and fear it may be painful and scary.

See death as part of life; natural, universal and permanent.

Interest in what happens to the person's body and spirit after death; fear non-existence and separation; question the reasons for death.

Common Reactions

Anxiety and general fearfulness

Covering up emotions and trying to appear normal; eg. joking, acting tough, being cool and in control

Concern about other survivors

Concern about personal future and security

Regressive behaviours: bedwetting, nightmares, acting out

Withdrawal or often endless questions about the death

Specific Requirements

Honest and accurate information about the death.

Opportunities to ask their own questions.

Reassurance about their future; eg. if the other parent died, who would care for them and how.

Adults to model appropriate grieving.

Respect for the privacy of their thoughts, feelings, and writings.

Inclusion, as wished, in adult activities associated with the death: rituals, funeral, discussions, plans.

Information for Adolescents.....Understanding your grief

As a young adult, you are involved in the process of discovering who you are as an individual. This means you have started to move away from your family - emotionally, socially and intellectually. This does not happen suddenly or easily, it is a difficult and confusing time. The different feelings you have will often conflict with one another. For example, you feel confident and insecure, invincible and vulnerable, angry and happy. It is hard to find a balance.

When death occurs, you may feel shocked that it could happen to your family, confused about how to react and overwhelmed by your emotions. You may feel alone even among friends or family; others don't seem to be able to understand what you are going through. You may find people suddenly expect you to act like an adult but still treat you like a child.

Your family may not be able to give you the support or security you need at this time. It may be one of them who has died, it may be everyone else is grieving too, it may be they don't understand your feelings. This can leave you feeling angry and abandoned by them.

Because there are already so many changes in your life, the death may feel like one loss too many and you find yourself shutting down and withdrawing. It becomes even harder to find the balance.

These are all normal responses to loss

Other Common Reactions

- You will find yourself concerned about how the death will affect your personal life, now and in the future.
- You may find it more helpful to turn to friends or teachers for support, rather than family.
- You could feel guilty about things said or not said, done or not done.
- You may feel guilty for not having been closer (physically or emotionally) to the person who died.
- You will probably want to spend more time alone.
- You may be afraid to view the dead person's body.
- You may want to remember only good things about the person who died. You push bad memories and thoughts to the back of your mind.
- You may not want to feel angry with the person who died and, so, blame others for the death and how it affects your life.
- You may feel totally empty and exhausted.
- You may not be able to cry.
- You may have trouble with sleeping or eating.

Information For Adolescents.....Dealing With Stress

Adults sometimes believe we live in a world without stress, or at least without anything like the stress they must deal with every day. Our stresses may be different, but they are no less real. These may be "the best years of our lives" but they will be that only if we find effective ways of dealing with the stress which accompanies them. Here are some suggestions for dealing with the stress which we believe you may find helpful.

Do

- Talk out the situation with someone in whom you can confide.
- Make lists of things you feel you have to get done, then cross off each job as you complete it.
- Try to figure out the sources of your stress. This can help you feel a bit less "helpless."
- Get regular exercise....it helps reduce feelings of stress.
- Relax....find a quiet place or do something you enjoy. (Pet your dog or cat, listen to music)
- Remember your past successes....this can build strength and hope.
- Help someone else....it can be a reminder you are not helpless.
- Seek help from someone else when you can't handle a problem alone. Friends, siblings, parents, counsellors....someone WILL be there for you.

Don't

- Take on any more responsibilities if you already have too many. You might even decide to get rid of some of the responsibilities you already have.
- Procrastinate....get as much done as you can without pressuring yourself. Remember: "The longest journey begins with but a single step."
- Take short-term "escapes". Don't self-medicate with drugs or alcohol and don't go on eating, dieting, or sleeping binges. This won't solve any problems but will rather postpone or make things worse.
- Blame others for your problems....start taking responsibility for your own life, then you can also take credit for your successes.
- Keep feelings bottled up. That kind of pressure can make you explode.
- Let others pressure you (parents, teachers, bosses, coaches). Listen to what they have to say, but set your own goals.
- Let yourself become isolated....people DO need people.
- Overwork yourself....do all you can, but remember that tomorrow is another day!

Remember, the world is not perfect and we don't have to be perfect either. Just try your best, care about other people and remember to let them care about you.

*Adapted from: "Dealing With Stress: A Survival Manual By and For Adolescents"
The students of River Dell Regional High School, Ordell, NJ 07649*

Children and Grief: Bibliography

Ages 3 - 5

- GYNN.** Mary Jane Muir. A well loved guinea pig dies suddenly; the family bury their pet and reminisce about special times.
- LIFETIMES.** R. Ingpen & M. Bryan. A simple story of beginnings, endings and lifetimes of plants, animals and people. Sensitively done.
- WHERE'S JESS.** Marv & Joy Johnson. This book addresses some of the questions a young child may ask when a sibling has died.
- NANA UPSTAIRS AND NANA DOWNSTAIRS.** Tomie de Paola. A young boy's special relationships with his two grandmothers and his feelings when they die.
- THE FALL OF FREDDY THE LEAF.** Leo Buscaglia. This story presents the life cycle of a leaf.

Ages 6 - 8

- ANNIE AND THE OLD ONE.** Miska Miles. A beautiful story of a Navaho girl whose grandmother is preparing for her death. She tries to stop time but comes to accept the inevitability of death.
- BADGER'S PARTING GIFTS.** Susan Varley. A badger dies after a long life. His friends are sad, but remember the things he taught them.
- BLEW AND THE DEATH OF THE MAG.** Wendy Lichtman. Wide range of emotions experienced by a young girl preparing for the death of her imaginary 'Mag'.
- TALKING ABOUT DEATH/TALKING ABOUT SERIOUS ILLNESS.** Earl & Sharon Grollman. Workbooks with discussion about their respective subject and space for the child to write or draw about her/his own feelings or concerns.
- THE TENTH GOOD THING ABOUT BARNEY.** Judith Viorst. When his cat dies, a boy tries to remember ten good things about him.
- I HAD A FRIEND NAMED PETER: TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT THE DEATH OF A FRIEND.** Janice Cohn. Betsy's friend Peter dies suddenly and her questions about why and what will happen to him now are answered by her parents and a schoolteacher.

Ages 9 - 12

- A SUMMER TO DIE.** Lois Lowry. After moving to the country, Molly becomes ill; her sister Meg and her parents must deal with her impending death.
- A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES.** Doris Smith. A boy describes his special friendship with Jamie. Good exploration of his feelings when Jamie suddenly dies.
- CHARLOTTE'S WEB.** E.B. White. A story of friendship, love, seasons, change and death between a young girl, a pig and a spider.
- LEARNING TO SAY GOOD-BYE.** Eda LeShan. Addresses the many questions and feelings a child has when a parent is sick and dies.

Parents and Caregivers

- CHILDHOOD AND DEATH.** Charles Corr & Hannelore Wass. eds. A comprehensive book about children and death; gives information and addresses issues.
- EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN.** Earl Grollman. Assorted articles regarding children and death; shows a deep concern for the child.
- HOW DO WE TELL THE CHILDREN?** Dan Schaefer & Christine Lyons. "A parent's guide to helping children understand and cope when someone dies". Is the result of his work with children as a funeral director.
- THE PRIVATE WORLDS OF DYING CHILDREN.** Myra Bluebond-Langer. Provides a child's perspective of his/her illness and death - a useful resource for caregivers.