

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO CHILDREN AND GRIEF

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Dealing with the death of a loved family member or friend is one of the most stressful events children ever face. Parents, who often are also grieving themselves, are frequently at a loss as to what they can say or do to help their children cope. We hope that this handout will help parents better understand how children often react to death and how parents can help their children with the grieving process.

HOW CHILDREN REACT TO DEATH

Children of all ages go through the grieving process. Any child who is old enough to emotionally care for someone is old enough to grieve. However, this is no one way that children grieve. Children react to, and cope with, death in various ways. There are many things that determine how an individual child grieves. One thing that relates to how children grieve is their age. Children under six usually do not understand the finality of death. Many children in this age range believe that death is temporary or reversible. They may appear unaffected by the death, especially if their immediate needs for security and reassurance are being met, because they believe the person will eventually return. Young children who have a limited understanding of death often react according to how others around them are reacting because it is difficult for them to understand exactly what has happened. It is usually not until somewhere between the ages of six and nine years that children begin to truly understand the finality of death.

Age is only one factor that impacts how children react to death. Other factors include a child's personality, their past experiences with death, and how other family members and friends are reacting. The important point to understand is that different children grieve in different ways. There is no one "right way" for children to react or grieve. Listed below are some common ways children react to the death of a family member or loved one.

Denial: Accepting the death of someone we love is a very difficult task. Denial (refusing to accept the death) is one of the reactions that we often see initially, especially during the six to eight week period following the death.

Sadness: The death of someone we love is a very sad experience for children, as with adults. As the sense of loss sets in, sadness may increase. For young children, sadness may intensify when they finally realize that the person that they love is not going to come back. While sadness is a common reaction, significant ongoing depression is not. If you are concerned that your child is significantly depressed you should seek professional assistance.

Anxiety: Most children have very limited, if any, experiences related to the death of a loved one. When death does occur, many children become anxious about the unknown. They may worry that they will die, or if a parent died that their other parent will die.

Guilt: Young children may have a difficult time with guilt because of their lack of understanding of "cause and effect." They may believe that their bad thoughts or bad actions caused the death. For example, if a child in anger said, "I wish he were dead" and if that person then dies, the child may feel that they caused the death.

Misbehavior: Some children misbehave a lot following a death. There are many reasons why such misbehavior may occur. For example, some children may misbehave to get attention or because of the guilt they may feel. Other children may “regress” in their behavior. This means they behave as if they were younger than they are. Older children and adolescents may act out (drug or alcohol use, risky behaviors, disobeying rules, sex, or other harmful activities).

Anger: Anger is a common reaction of many children. Such anger can be directed at anyone or anything. It is not uncommon for children to express anger at the person who died because they may feel deserted by that person. Some children do not express a lot of anger but are very irritable.

Physical: Changes in sleeping and eating habits and physical symptoms are common in some children. Children may be having difficulty falling asleep, waking up, dreaming, increased or decreased appetite, stomachaches, headaches, and difficulty concentrating.

During the grieving process almost all children will display some of the reactions listed above. Remember, for the most part, these are normal reactions. It is impossible to say how long such reactions will last. The grieving process is an ongoing process--there is no one point when a child (or adult) stops grieving. However, parents can help their children with the grieving process and hopefully minimize the length and severity of the behaviors listed above. The following section offers advice to parents on helping their children mourn.

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN MOURN

What’s the best way for you to talk to your children about death? How can you help your children deal with the thoughts and feelings that naturally follow someone’s death? The fact is that there is no magical or “one size fits all” answer to those questions. Rather, how you deal with those issues partly depends upon details like your children’s age, the nature of the death, and so forth. It also partly depends upon your own experiences with death and grief, and your comfort level in discussing those subjects. With that in mind, what follows are some suggestions on how to communicate with your children about death and grief, how to help them cope with this very important part of your life, and how to help them deal with future losses.

Perhaps the most important thing that you can do is LISTEN to your children. Allow your children to express their thoughts and fears, talk about their feelings, and ask you questions individually. Don’t try to convince your children that they do not or even should not feel bad, and don’t just change the subject or quickly talk about something else. Let them know that it’s okay to say whatever they want, and that you want to hear whatever they have to say. Sometimes, this is easier said (or written) than done. That is, often parents believe that they should try to get their children to not talk or even think about someone’s death. This is often done under the mistaken notion the (a) children can easily be helped to “forget” about someone’s death, and (b) talking about the death will only make things worse. In fact, the opposite is generally true on both points. Children can no more “forget” about a death than can an adult. And, research has shown us that the more we actively try to put something out of our minds, the more we may actually think about it.

How do you HELP YOUR CHILDREN EXPRESS themselves and COMMUNICATE with you and others? Older children and teenagers are often able to express themselves relatively well with words. Keep in mind, though, that many children, especially younger ones, don’t always express themselves very well with words, or they may not be able to express themselves as well with words as they can in other ways. For those children, acting out stories about death and grief with dolls or puppets, writing letters to the deceased, drawing pictures about the person’s life and death, having a “conversation” with the deceased on a toy telephone, and making scrapbooks of memories are some ways that children can communicate their thoughts and feelings. You might suggest those projects to your children and see if they want to do any of them. Don’t force them – they’ll let you know if they want to participate, either now or later. Another way to help your children process information and express their thoughts and feelings is to put yourselves in situations which can naturally open

up communication. For example, visit the grave or mausoleum with your children, look at photographs or videos of the deceased, let them help you put away the person's belongings, and don't be afraid to read books or watch movies which deal with normal feelings about death and grief. Above all, don't expect only one discussion, or one trip to the grave, or one look through a photo album to be "enough" to make everything right again. Children need time to cope with a death – time, and your help and understanding.

Another major way in which you can help your child is to demonstrate healthy ways to cope with death and grief through YOUR EXAMPLE. Don't underestimate the fact that your children learn a great deal about what to do and how to handle difficult situations by observing you. Don't be afraid to cry or express your sadness and grief in front of your child. Demonstrating that it is okay to cry and to be sad and dismiss the deceased, or to even be angry that the person had to die, will help your child to honestly and openly express his or her own feelings. Hiding your feelings and avoiding discussion of death will only teach your child that such feelings are not okay, that feelings should not be expressed openly, and that grief should be dealt with alone. Children (and adults) are generally greatly comforted by not having to deal with death and grief alone. An important point, though, is that if you feel that you are having extreme difficulty coping with a death, then you should talk about that with another adult or seek professional help. Remember, your child will look to you to see how to react and cope, and not the other way around. They cannot and should not be expected to demonstrate to you how to cope, and they will only become more anxious if they see that you are unable to cope yourself. In addition, they should not be put in a situation of feeling as though they have to act as an adult before they are able and ready to do so. For that reason, avoid comments to children such as "you need to be strong now," or "you're the man (or woman) in the house now." Those statements typically only worry and stress children more.

Finally, another task will be to REASSURE your children that they are okay, as are other family members and friends, despite the fact that someone has, indeed, died. One of the most common reactions by children of all ages (yes, including teenagers) following someone's death is worry and anxiety about their own mortality. This can usually be addressed well by reminding your children specifically why the person died, and pointing out that they (your children) are healthy and not, for instance, elderly, suffering from a disease, etc. It can also help to remind them of the steps they take to stay healthy (e.g., eat right, get enough sleep, know how to be safe). Another way to address this issue, and also to avoid confusing and distressing your children, is by talking with them about the inevitability of death both honestly and in a way which makes sense to them. How you discuss this should be guided by your own religious or spiritual beliefs and, very importantly, by your child's level of understanding of the concept of death. One thing to remember, though, is that simple and truthful statements are most appropriate. Do not be afraid to say that someone "died." Terms such as "Dad flew up to heaven," "we lost your Grandpa last night," "God took Aunt Wilma today," "your brother went to sleep forever," and "Mom has gone on a very long trip" all can simply confuse and even terrorize young children.

Another reaction by virtually all children (and again, including teenagers) following someone's death is worry and anxiety about what would happen to them if one or both parents, or other relatives, were to die. That is, children frequently worry a great deal about who would care for them if others were also to die. The points covered in the previous paragraph are also relevant to this situation, but, in addition, it is also important to reassure your children that someone will always be available to care for him/her, no matter what. In order for you to discuss this with your children honestly (since children are good at knowing when parents are telling the truth!), and also for your own peace of mind, it is very important for you to actually have a plan for who would be your children's legal guardian. Take this seriously, think it through, and make sure that a plan is written in a will or other legal document. This will benefit everyone tremendously.

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