

Hope Resources

Children and Grief

Adults grieve and so do children. As for an adult, 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 speak, they are able to grieve the loss of a loved one. And these feelings about 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 the child to learn about both the joy and the pain that come from caring deeply for other people.

Talking about death to children

Adults may struggle with facing death themselves and discussing it with children can be very daunting. Being honest about the death and having open conversations about this will be hard but are vital. If the adults are able to approach the death from personal experience it can help children to form healthy attitudes toward life and death.

Above all, children need to be surrounded by feelings of warmth, acceptance and understanding.

Talking about the death of a brother or sister

Next to the death of a parent, the death of a sibling can be the most traumatic event in a child’s life. Not only have they lost a family member but a significantly important relationship. These relationships are characterised by a myriad of emotions, and this colours the surviving child’s grief experience.

Siblings can often be the forgotten mourners as family and friends support the adults in the situation. This unintentional overlooking can lead to the bereaved sibling feeling forgotten, isolated and unimportant.

It is vital that if the parents are unable to support their other children while they are managing their own overwhelming grief, that another adult is appointed to be the grief helper. This person needs to be able to answer the questions the child may have about the death honestly and frankly. They need to be able to be sensitive and warm and be aware of what is communicated to children non-verbally about a situation.

Encourage questions about Death

When someone has died, the adults need to be able to talk openly and honestly with a child about what has happened in the language of the child. E.g. Grannie has died instead of Grannie has gone away.

Adults don't need to have all of the answers as these aren't as important as the act of sitting and listening attentively to the child.

Children may ask the same question over and over again. This is quite natural and repeating the question and getting answers helps them to understand and adjust to the loss.

Allow children to participate

Create an atmosphere that tells children that their thoughts, fears and wishes will be recognised when someone they love dies. This recognition includes the right to be part of the planning for the funeral.

Since the funeral of someone loved is a significant event, children should have the same opportunity to attend as any other family member. That's "allowed" to attend not "forced" to attend.

Explain that the purpose of a funeral is to honour the person who has died; as a time of help, comfort and support to each other and to affirm that life still goes on.

Viewing the body of someone who has died can also be a positive experience as it allows for the child to say "goodbye" and helps with the reality of death. Again this viewing the body should not be forced on a child.

Let children be children when it comes to expressing their grief. Never tell them that they are now the man/woman of the house or need to take care of their siblings now. When you force a bereaved child to grow up too soon you don't allow them the time and space to mourn in their own developmentally appropriate way.

Ways to help a grieving child

- Be a good listener- a bereaved child's behaviour can be very telling about their emotions
- Be patient- children's grief isn't typically obvious and immediate
- Be honest- don't lie about the death or use language that clouds the facts.
- Be available- children need to know they can count on the adults to listen, support and love them.
- Listen- let the child teach you what grief is like for them- be patient, flexible and present.
- Allow children to express a full range of emotions - anger, guilt, protest and despair are natural reactions to the death of a loved one.
- Children are part of the family too and need reassurance from the presence of loving people.

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