

Building Emotional Intelligence in Children: Talking About Sadness, Loss and Grief

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Sadness, grief and loss are a part of being human. This includes everything from the tinges of sadness that bite all of us at times, to the deep, overwhelming grief that threatens to wring the life from our core. If only we could stand between sadness and the small people in our lives and keep their hearts and minds happy all the time. But we can't. The next best thing we can do is teach them as much as we can about how to navigate through this very real and unavoidable human emotion with courage, strength and wisdom. Here's how to build emotional intelligence in children (older ones too) and empower them to deal with sadness, grief and loss.

Talking about sadness, grief & loss. The words.

Sadness comes about when we lose something, or when we feel as though we have. The loss can be all sorts of things. Maybe it's the loss of closeness to someone you love after an argument. Maybe it's the loss of something you wanted. Maybe it happens when you're scared, or when someone says or does something that feels bad. Some sadness feels unbearable. It's the type that comes from losing someone close to you, perhaps through death or distance, losing a pet, or having to go through something deeply painful such as the separation of your parents.

There are no silly reasons for feeling sad. Sadness, like all emotions, is there because it has a job to do. It might not always come to you at the best time, which is why in some circumstances it can feel important to pretend for a little while that it doesn't exist - and that's okay. The main thing is that when it's safe for it to be there, you can let it be there. Some of the important reasons for sadness are:

- to encourage you to find support and comfort from someone who cares about you (your heart tends to know what you need, even if you're not so sure);
- to let you know that something that needs your attention;
- to signal to other people that you might need some love, kindness or cuddles;
- to give you the opportunity to withdraw, so you can be still and quiet for long enough to get clarity around whatever has made you feel sad.

The temptation can be to push your sadness away, pretend it doesn't exist, or cover it up with another feeling, such as anger. The problem is that none of that makes the feeling go away, and can sometimes make you feel worse for longer.

Sadness will always pass. Be patient, kind and gentle to yourself and you will get through it. Being able to understand your emotions and how to deal with them is kind of a superpower. Here are some important things to know about sadness.

Let Your Sadness Work For You.

1. Your sadness has an important job to do. (I know, I wish it could find an easier way too.)

Sadness that comes from disappointment can feel really bad, but that's because it's tempting to focus on the loss. Sadness can have a way of making you want to give up but it can actually be an important message to keep going, though maybe in a different direction.

Think about the loss for a little while if you want to – there's nothing wrong with that – but then, think about what might be a better direction to take. In this sense, sadness can be like a street sign, sending you down a path that will be even better for you than the one that you're sad about losing.

2. It gives you the time and space to figure things out.

Sadness puts you into energy saving mode, which is a really clever way to give you the opportunity to think about things. When you're sad, it's likely that you won't feel like doing anything, and your thoughts might feel pretty intense because your mind will be working hard to figure things out. This is nothing to worry about. Sadness can be full of important information for you. Take some quiet time and see if your sadness is trying to tell you something. Is it trying to teach you about the type of people who are good for you, or who you're best avoiding (not everyone is lovely to be around)? Maybe, if you're sad about an argument with someone you care about, it's trying to teach you about the things that are important, or a better way to do things. Perhaps it's encouraging you to take a different direction that you hadn't thought of before – one that will be brilliant for you. When you take the time to sit with your sadness, or to talk through it with someone who cares about you, you'll come out stronger, wiser and clearer than before.

3. Or to adjust to a new normal.

When something bad happens, things might not return to the normal you know but at some point, there will be a new normal. It might look different to your old one and it might not feel as good for a while, but it will still be one that you can love, live, thrive and be happy in. This might take time though, so be gentle with yourself and give the time some time. You'll have your ups and you'll have your downs, but know that the downs aren't a backward step – they're just a normal part of adjusting to something new.

4. So let it be your shelter for a little while.

When you feel sad, you'll probably feel other things as well – confused, jealous, angry, lonely, not good enough. Let sadness be your refuge while you sort through your feelings or talk them through with someone you love.

5. Your sadness isn't the enemy.

Sadness is there to help you, not hurt you, and it's not there to keep happiness away. It's what steps in when you're steering away from happiness, to help you steer yourself back in the right direction. You and your feelings are a partnership, and the better you listen to your feelings, the better they'll work for you.

6. Actually, it's trying to be your hero.

Sadness shows up because there's something you need know. It always has something to tell you. Maybe it's to slow down when you make decisions, maybe it's to move closer to the people who care about you, away from the people who don't know how to, or to be kinder to yourself.

Sadness is a hero - not the kind with a cape and a fun looking costume, but the soft, tender kind that will help you figure out what you need. But you'll need to be quiet and still to hear it.

Sadness doesn't always feel like sadness.

1. That numb feeling - it's there for a reason.

When something really sad happens, you might feel numb at first. That's okay and is something that often happens with deep, deep sadness. It's your brain's way of protecting you from feeling too much sadness all at once. Be patient with yourself and go with whatever it is that your heart wants you to feel. It usually knows what's best for you.

2. You might feel really angry, and that's okay.

Anger is like a security guard that sometimes tries to stop really sad feelings from overwhelming you. Intense sadness can be a bit scary, as though if you feel it a little bit you won't be able to stop. Anger can be a handy way to stop feeling as though you'll be crushed by sadness, but it won't be helpful if it blocks what you're really feeling. It also won't be helpful if it pushes away the people who can comfort you and help you with whatever it is that you're going through. It's important to talk about how you're feeling - it will help you to move through the feelings and heal. Anger might stop you from feeling more difficult feelings for a little while, but it's important to remember that the only way to deal with feelings is to feel them. Know that you'll always be stronger than you think you are.

And some ways to feel better.

1. Your mind is a powerful thing, and can stop you feeling too sad for too long.

Our experience is made up of what we think, what we feel and what we do, but there's something important that you need to know: All three don't need to match up. This is where you have the power to make yourself feel differently. Usually when you feel sad, you think sad things, and you act in a sad way. The same goes for other experiences - when you feel happy, you think happy things and you behave in a happy way. Same with feeling powerful. If you strike a powerful pose (standing tall, hands on hips, legs wide apart and a powerful expression on your face - superhero style) it's likely that you'll think powerful thoughts and be tempted to use a powerful voice when you talk. But - and here's where your power comes in - if you change one of them, thoughts feelings or behaviour, the other two will eventually catch up. So, when you're feeling sad and thinking sad things, try doing something that makes you feel happier - maybe kick a ball, play with your pet, do a drawing or watch a funny movie - whatever makes you happy. When you do this, you can actually change your brain and make yourself feel something different.

2. Hug, if it feels right.

The touch of someone who you know and trust can bring comfort and actually help to ease sadness. That's because this sort of trusted touch causes the brain to release good chemicals that help you to feel cared for and close to the people you are with.

Remember though, that you are always in charge of deciding who is allowed to touch you. If you're not okay with it, then it's not a good time, or a good touch.

3. Even strong people need people. We all do.

Sadness can feel really lonely, but it's amazingly powerful in letting other people know that you need them, or letting us know that we need to be with someone who cares. Being with people who feel good to be around fuels you up with courage, strength and gives you what you need to deal with the tough stuff. None of us can do it all on our own and knowing the difference between the things you can handle on your own (and there'll be plenty of those!) and the things you need a hand to deal with, will be something about you that's pretty awesome.

4. Lift your heart rate to lift your mood.

Physical activity will help your brain to stay strong and happy. Exercise helps to strengthen the part of your brain that is responsible for moods and emotions. It's called the hippocampus. Even a brisk ten minute walk will be enough to lift your mood.

5. There is no right amount before you should be feeling better.

When something sad happens, there is no 'normal' amount of time that it will take you to feel better. It will take as long as it takes. Just keep moving forward – even if it's a bit each day. Big things come from lots of little things adding together.

6. But be kind to yourself and don't let your sadness roll on for too long.

When you think about sad things over and over and over, it can cause your sadness to get deeper and deeper. This can lead to something called depression, which is when your sadness stays for a long time, affects your sleep, your mood, and stops you looking forward to things and enjoying the things you used to enjoy. Know that it's completely okay to feel sad and to think sad things, but after a little while it's also important to focus on moving forward and feeling better. Sometimes that's about learning what you need to learn, making some brave decisions, spending time with the people who care about you and doing the things that you love, to give your mind what it needs to change its focus from sad to happy. There is no set time for this, but if after a while you find it hard to look forward to things, or you stop enjoying the things you used to find fun, it's really important to talk to an adult who cares about you.

What parents and carers can do.

1. Validate their sadness. But don't try to change it.

Don't force your sad one to move on or let go of their sadness too quickly. Sadness is a normal, healthy emotion and if you pull them away from it before they've had the time to adjust to their new reality or work through what it means for them, it could stifle them. Grief and sadness is the way we adjust to loss.

It's healthy, important and normal. If it's ignored, played down or not allowed, it can actually make their sadness more difficult and last for longer.

2. They might avoid the things they used to love.

Things won't make sense for a while, and it will be completely normal for them to avoid the things they used to love. When there is a loss, many of the things that were important and fun will take on a different meaning because those things will feel different, as though something is missing, and most likely, something will be. Encourage them, but don't hurry them or force them. The best time for them to get there is when they get there.

3. Watch the silence.

Children might not have the words or the self-awareness to articulate what they are feeling. Be careful not to interpret their silence as a sign that everything is fine. Check in with them from time to time. Sometimes their silence will be okay and the best thing will be to give them the space they need to make sense of what they're feeling. Sometimes though, their silence might be a sign that they need help to put words to what they're feeling, to make sense of what has happened, or that they are waiting for someone to hold them steady when their world feels like it's falling apart.

4. And when they're grieving ...

Grief will come with so many intense feelings and it will likely change their behaviour for a while, sometimes drastically. They might have trouble sleeping, become angry, not want to talk, or struggle in school. See these for what they are - part of an adjustment this young person never imagined having to make. Give them time and reassure them that their feelings are normal, that however they feel is completely okay and above all else, that they are loved.

5. Understand the relationship between sadness and anger.

Grieving children (and adults) will often move between deep sadness and fiery, angry outbursts. The move can happen quickly and unexpectedly. Children might not know how to deal with their anger and might need a hand to work through their feelings. It's likely that their feelings won't make sense to them and even if they do, they won't necessarily know what to do with those feelings. When this happens, they might take it out on the person or people they love the most. The target will be wrong, but it's likely to be the only target they have. Understand where it's coming from, and be patient.

6. Let them talk

Let them talk about the loss, whether it's a loved one, a pet, a friendship, or a parental separation. It might feel as though you're doing the right thing by putting a lid on discussions and your own feelings, but children need to know that what they're feeling is okay, and they need the information that will safely fill the gaps for them. Let nothing be off limits for them if they want to talk. They need to be able to revisit the relationship or whatever has been lost to them, even if it's only in their thoughts or their words or the conversation with you.

They might also be aching for someone to tell them that whatever they're feeling is okay, so if you're the one they're coming to, know how important you are and be the one to give that to them.

7. Let them see you feel, but don't lean on them for support.

Let them see that you also have feelings and that you can manage those feelings. This will help to normalise their experience and make it safe to talk about what they're going through. It will also help them to expand their emotional vocabulary, so they can be aware of their feelings when they feel them. It's important though, that you don't lean on them for support. They need to feel safe and secure, and as though they can come to you, not as though they have to look after you.

8. Watch that the sadness doesn't continue for too long.

The body has a way of responding to loss. In the short-term, it will release stress hormones that will be helpful at first. Eventually though, they can do harm and effect the hardwiring of the brain. We know that the brain continues to produce new brain cells right throughout the life span. When sadness stays for too long, it can turn into depression and inhibit the growth of brain cells in the hippocampus, which is the part of the brain that's responsible for memory, learning, emotion and mood. Depression causes the production of new brain cells in the hippocampus to slow right down. The way to relieve this is to encourage things that actually promote the growth of new brain cells such as exercise, learning something new and connecting with others.

All feelings have an important reason for being there. It's never the feeling that causes the problem, but what we do with it. Pushing it away, pretending it doesn't exist, or making an enemy of it will cause trouble. Being able to identify, accept and understand feelings is at the heart of emotional intelligence, which is one of the strongest predictors of success and living well.

Sadness is something that we are motivated to avoid, but it's not an enemy. It's because of our desire to avoid sadness that we look after the people and things that are important to us. Sometimes though, sadness falls upon us anyway. The more we can help our children to understand why they feel what they do, the more we'll be able flourish their capacity to have full, healthy relationships, and a vibrant, whole-hearted life.