

Aultman Hospice and Grief Services Present:

How to Help Children with Death and Grief



What is Grief?

Grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss.

Grief is about relationships. The death of a loved one is a physical end of a unique relationship.

Feelings are generated by the unique events and interactions, both positive and negative.



Every one experiences grief in a unique way. The follow are a list of common symptoms children experience during grief:

Emotional

Anger
Anxiety
Insecurity
Fears
Lack of feelings
Sadness
Depression
Rage
Loneliness
Mood Swings
Denial

Behavioral

Trouble in school
Acting “too good”
Regression (bed wetting, thumb sucking)
Clingy behavior
Aggression
Irritability

Physical

Stomachaches
Headaches
Fatigue
Appetite changes
Sleep disturbances

Psychological

Concentration difficulties
Low self-esteem
Forgetfulness
Confusion
Guilt feelings

Social

Increased conflict with others
Withdrawal

Spiritual

Questions about faith, meaning,
or the afterlife

*What do children need during this time?
Children need information.*

Children are able to tell when something is wrong. They may not be able to figure out what it is or why.

When we avoid telling the truth, often we do it because we are uncomfortable, not because our children cannot deal with it.

Avoiding sensitive issues may be easier for you as the parent, but you may be doing a disservice to your children.

Children expect honest answers to their questions.

Children can only absorb small amounts of information. Give simple explanations. Invite them to ask questions and openly share their concerns.

Most children cope much better when they are given clear, concrete, and honest information from the beginning.

Their imaginations usually create situations that are inaccurate and full of fear. A child's imagination is often much worse than reality.

Be honest if you don't know the answer to your child's question.

Talk opening to your children

Children will take cues from you. If you talk openly and honestly about your feelings and emotions, so will your children. Model what you want your children to do. Instead of asking how they feel or what they think, tell them your thoughts and feelings. They will know it's okay to talk about their own. This eliminates any fears they might have about your reaction to their feelings or thoughts.

Listen... Listen... Listen...

It is important for you to listen to your child's thoughts on how the loved one died. It is common for children to believe that they are in some way responsible for the death.

Even when younger children do not understand death or what is happening, listening to their thoughts and feelings makes it easier for them to come back again when they need more answers.



How Children Understand Death

Infants and toddlers do not comprehend death, but meeting physical needs and providing comfort and touch is important.

Preschool children often see death as reversible, temporary, and impersonal. Watching cartoon characters being blown up or run over and suddenly pop back to life reinforces this idea.

Children between the ages of 5 and 9 begin to realize that death is final, but it is still seen as impersonal. “It can’t happen to me.”

How Children Understand Death

Children between the ages of 9 and 11 fully comprehend that death is irreversible, all living things die, and they too will die one day.

Teens have a full understanding of death. They grasp abstract ideas, but tend to shut out thoughts about their own death.

Use the word “die” as you explain death to your children.

Children do not understand metaphors. Little children are very literal. They do not understand the idea that words do not mean exactly what is said.

Many children do not understand that death is permanent and that all biological functioning (eating, breathing), cognitive functioning (thinking, dreaming), emotional functioning (feelings), and physical functioning (speaking, sleeping) have ceased.

Ex. “Grandma is sleeping.”

A Child might be afraid to go to sleep for months.

Ex. “Daddy went to be with Jesus.”

A child might become angry with God for taking away their loved one.

Or a child might be afraid Jesus will come take them away, too.

It takes energy to hold onto emotions.

Clench your stomach muscles and hold it for as long as you can. It doesn't take long for your stomach to hurt. Image it felt that way all the time because you were holding onto something that happened in the past or the fear of something happening in the future.

When something bad happens and we tell ourselves or other tell us that we shouldn't feel this way, instead of dealing with those emotions, we push the feelings down and hold onto them.

Ex. "Don't think about it"

"Don't cry, it's okay"

How Children express themselves

A child may show little immediate grief. You might think she is unaffected by the loss, but children tend to express their sadness on and off over long periods of time and at unexpected moments.

No matter how your children express their grief, be sympathetic to their needs and nonjudgmental of their responses.

When adults express grief, they generally choose methods that involve the use of words. Children, however, are often unable to use words to communicate their inner world. Instead they often use behaviors and various forms of art and play.

Young children often express grief by acting clingy or irritable. Older children might act out, withdrawal, act overly grown up.

When children are angry...

Anger is a part of grief. We can help children by accepting their feelings without scolding them.

Anger is normal during a terminal illness and the time after. This illness has disrupted their lives in a major way. It should not be considered wrong or bad. Anger itself is not destructive; it is the way we choose to express and vent our anger.

How to help your child when they are angry:

Acknowledge how difficult this time must be for them.

Keep them involved with physical activities, such as sports or exercise.

Talk about the anger together.

Help your child come up with a list of safe activities he/she can do to express their anger.

When children act withdrawn or overly grown up...

How to help your child when they withdrawal:

Spend extra time with that child.

Don't hassle them to talk to you about how they are doing.

How to help your child when they act overly grown up:

Give positive feedback.

Don't expect too much form them around the house.

Encourage them to spend time with friends.

Intervene if you hear family or friends telling them to "be strong".

Assure them they need not feel responsible to take care of you or be strong for you.

Younger kids will often express themselves in art and play.

When children are working through these feeling and thoughts, they might draw pictures of things that scare them, include a dead or dying character in their games, drawing pictures of ghost, fires, or dismembered bodies, and if the patient is a parent, children may include orphans in their games or pictures.

How to help your child express themselves through art and play:

Give them plenty of time to draw and play.

Encourage your child to keep an art journal.

Ask your child, "Would you like to tell me about your picture?" Accept no for an answer.

Coping Skills

Ideas to help your child remember their loved one:

Make a scrap book

Collect favorite pictures and frame them

Enlarge pictures

Talk freely about your own memories

“Things I Miss About...”

Read some children’s book about remembering loved ones

Children need to acknowledge the person has died and say good-bye.

Ex. Write a good-bye letter.

Draw a good-bye picture.

Write a good-bye note on a balloon and let it go.

Write a good-bye poem.



Coping Skills

Write a letter. It communicates 4 important details: Apologies, forgiveness, significant emotions, and fond memories.

This helps the child to say all the things he/she wants and needs to say so they are not trapped inside. It also allows the child to say good-bye to the physical relationship that no longer exists. A suggested ending to your letter is “I love you, I miss you, Good-bye.”

P.S. Letter- As they remember something else they want to say. This reminds them it's okay to talk about the loved one who passed away. As they grow up, it will be easier for them to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

It is often helpful for children to read the letter out loud.

Coping Skills

Special events tend to act as a trigger or reminder about the people who are not present.

Ex. Holidays, birthdays, recitals, sports events, graduation, confirmation, divorce, career decision, wedding, and new children

Suggestion of card or special gift.

Ex. Wedding card from loved one

Coping Skills

Talk to your child's school including the guidance counselor.

Talk about when and how other children should find about your loved one's illness and death.

Warn your children that most people won't know what to do to comfort them and might say hurtful or embarrassing things on accident.

If your child lost a parent, talk to them about Mother's Day/ Father's Day. Plan ahead what your child will do if children make art projects in school.

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