

Children's Grief

There is no way this intense topic can ever be adequately covered in this brief *Hints for Health*. However, it may inspire further investigation into this very vital issue. The sad truth of life is that we must all experience loss and grief. In those moments, we turn to our faith, family, and friends for comfort to help ebb the overwhelming feeling of mourning. Death related tragedies such as suicide, homicide, and AIDS, and non-death related traumas such as divorce, separation, foster care, abandonment, bullying, terrorism, abuse, and violence have left children overwhelmed with their feelings and distracted by their thoughts.



DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF GRIEF

Studies show that children go through a series of stages in their understanding of death. For example, preschool children usually see death as reversible, temporary, and impersonal. Watching cartoon characters on television miraculously rise whole again after having been crushed or blown apart tends to reinforce this notion. Between the ages of five and nine, most children are beginning to realize that death is final and that all living things die, but still, they do not see death as personal. They harbor the idea that, somehow, they can escape through their own ingenuity and efforts.

During this stage, children also tend to personify death. They may associate death with a skeleton or the angel of death, and some children have nightmares about them. From nine or ten through adolescence, children begin to comprehend fully that death is irreversible, that all living things die, and that they too will die someday. Some begin to work on developing philosophical views of life and death. Teenagers, especially, often become intrigued with seeking the meaning of life.

GRIEF IS A NORMAL REACTION

When children experience the death of a person who has played a significant role in their life, it is normal for children to struggle, whether the relationship with that person was caring and loving, or contentious and difficult. The absence of a person takes time to fully accept and even then, children may continue to miss them in their own special way. In truth, children never “get over” a person’s death, but they can learn to live with the reality. Grief is not a problem we are trying to fix for a child; it is an experience they are living. Mood changes or feelings of grief, even several years out from the event, are a common part of adapting to life without someone and to the changes

that come with that person's death. Children need adults to be patient with them as they adjust to these changes.

CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW THE TRUTH.

Most parents and caregivers would agree that they would prefer that their children not have to deal with the difficult truths that might accompany a death or loss. So, quite often words like *dead* or *die* are avoided and the truth about how a person died is not shared in a desire to protect children. Unfortunately, in doing so, other problems are created. Although it may be challenging to share the truth about how someone died, honest answers build trust, help provide understanding, and allow children to feel comfortable approaching adults with questions.

EACH CHILD'S GRIEF IS AS UNIQUE TO HIM OR HER AS THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DECEASED.

Because of this, the way children experience and express their grief will vary for each person. Some children have a need to talk about the person who died and their feelings about it; others might not talk about the person at all; and even others, might express their grief through art, play, music, or writing. In whatever way children might experience and respond to their grief, these expressions are how they are adapting to life without the physical presence of that person and adjusting to one of memories. It is important not to assume what children might be feeling about a person's death. Reactions vary from sadness, anger, fear, guilt, and even relief. It is important to listen to children, meet them on their terms, and come to understand their unique grief reactions.

GRIEVING CHILDREN OFTEN FEEL ALONE AND MISUNDERSTOOD.

Many well-meaning adults avoid talking about the deceased person in fear that doing so will exacerbate the grief children are experiencing. In doing so, children might feel as though talking about or even expressing their grief is not acceptable. Also, many children feel like they are the only person who has experienced the death of someone in their life, even though there might be other friends experiencing similar circumstances. It is helpful to children when adults in their lives provide opportunities to acknowledge the grief everyone is feeling. When children feel understood by family and friends and when they can express their grief in their own unique way, they feel less alone and, in turn, fare better than they would otherwise.

GRIEF IS A LIFELONG JOURNEY, AND CHILDREN OFTEN EXPERIENCE THEIR GRIEF ON DIFFERENT LEVELS AND AT DIFFERENT TIMES THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES.

Grief has no time limit. Milestones, special celebrations, and experiences often bring back thoughts of the deceased. Allowing children to share openly feelings can help to normalize this experience and help them find ways to deal with these powerful feelings that will come and go...and come back again throughout their lives.

GRIEVING CHILDREN OFTEN EXPERIENCE PERSONAL GROWTH BECAUSE OF THEIR LOSS.

Personal growth is often a by-product of going through grief. It is important to note that personal growth does not diminish the sense of loss or grief a person feels, nor does it imply that someone’s death was a positive experience. Yet, many children have reported that they are more compassionate toward others, value relationships with friends and family on a new level, or experience a greater sense of appreciation for life after the death of someone.

GRIEVING CHILDREN FEEL LESS ALONE WHEN THEY ARE WITH OTHER CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED THE DEATH OF A SIGNIFICANT PERSON AND WHEN THEY HAVE LOVING, CONSISTENT ADULTS IN THEIR LIVES.

Greater than any education, information, or advice we can give to children who are grieving is to allow children who are grieving to connect with other children going through a similar experience. When children can interact with one another, they feel less alone.

CHILDREN WHO ARE HAVING SERIOUS PROBLEMS WITH GRIEF AND LOSS MAY SHOW ONE OR MORE OF THESE SIGNS:

- An extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events.
- Inability to sleep, loss of appetite, or prolonged fear of being alone.
- Acting much younger for an extended period.
- Excessively imitating the dead person.
- Repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person.
- Withdrawal from friends.
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school.



PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING IS OFTEN NEEDED TO HELP A CHILD WITH COMPLICATED GRIEF MOVE FORWARD WITH THEIR LIVES.

SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION

LISTEN TO THE CHILD’S HEART.

Help him/her understand where God is amid the grief. Just as children’s reactions to grief are individualized, so are their reactions to God. These are some typical reactions from children:

- “Get away from me, God! You made this happen!”
- “God is there for me. He’ll take care of this.”

- “Why did you do this, God?”
- “I hate you, God.”
- “There is no God. If there was, he wouldn’t have done this.”

These reactions to God are another dimension of the grieving process. Just as the grieving process isn’t linear, neither are children’s reactions to God throughout this process. Children’s feelings about God may vary from minute -to-minute, or they may experience a variety of feelings simultaneously. Children can experience these reactions to God in varying degrees of intensity as they sort through the confusion created by the trauma.

LET THE CHILD KNOW THAT IT’S OKAY TO FEEL WHATEVER HE/SHE IS FEELING ABOUT GOD.

Children shouldn’t deny or judge their feelings. Instead, they can bring their feelings to God for healing, and they can trust that God is there to help them.

UNDERSTAND GOD’S ROLE IN HEALING.

Find strength in knowing that God is your most powerful ally in helping a child to heal. It’s important to understand the role God plays in healing. Call upon the power of the Great Healer as he has ministered to you. One of the best ways to help children trust God again is in being a good role model by:

- Demonstrating your trust in God despite the trauma.
- Reminding the child that God was in their lives before the trauma and will always be there.
- Seeing God at work in your life.
- Being “real” and expressing feelings about God appropriately that will enable children to express their feelings.

WAYS TO HELP A GRIEVING CHILD

- Be truthful.
- Keep explanations simple.
- Share the facts.
- Remind the child that it was not his/her fault.
- Define death.
- Allow the child to be a recognized mourner.
- Remember children grieve differently.
- Treat every child and their grief as unique.
- Keep the child up to date on a family member’s illness.
- Encourage a child’s belief system.
- Prepare children for funerals and memorials.

WAYS TO INCLUDE CHILDREN IN MEMORIALIZING

- Make a play.
- Write a letter, poem, or song.
- Act out a puppet show (Invite friends and relatives).
- Take photographs.
- Create rituals, i.e. light a candle.
- Plant flowers.
- Bake cookies.
- Draw a memory picture.
- Send off a balloon.
- Make a video.
- Create a memory book, box or table.
- Share memories.
- Share God's love and say a prayer.



If you have any questions about this topic, please reach out to CompassionLink at info@compassionlink.org. We will be happy to help you with your questions.

REFERENCES

<http://www.grievingchildren.net>

<https://www.aacap.org>

<http://www.hospicenet.org>

<https://childrengrieve.org>