



Fact Sheet: The Grief of Children

One of the most difficult tasks following the death of a loved one is discussing and explaining the death with children in the family. This task is even more distressing when the parents are in the midst of their own grief.

Because many adults have problems dealing with death they assume that children cannot cope with it. They may try to protect children by leaving them out of the discussions and rituals associated with the death. Thus, children may feel anxious, bewildered, and alone. They may be left on their own to seek answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and reassurance of those around them.

All children will be affected in some way by a death in the family. Above all, children who are too young for explanations need love from the significant people in their lives to maintain their own security. Young children may not verbalize their feelings about a death in the family. Holding back their feelings because they are so overwhelming, the children may appear to be unaffected. It is more common for them to express their feelings through behavior and play. Regardless of this ability or inability to express themselves, children do grieve, often very deeply.

SOME COMMON EXPRESSIONS OF CHILDREN'S GRIEF

Experts have determined that those in grief pass through four major emotions: fear, anger, guilt, and sadness. It should be remembered that everyone who is touched by a death experiences these emotions to some degree – grandparents, friends, physicians, nurses, and children. Each adult and child's reactions to death are individual in nature. Some common reactions are:

SHOCK

– The child may not believe the death really happened and will act as though it did not. This is usually because the thought of death is too overwhelming.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

– The child may have various complaints such as headache or stomach ache and fear that he too will die.

ANGER

– Being mostly concerned with his own needs. The child may be angry at the person who died because he feels he has been left “all alone” or that God didn’t “make the person well.”

GUILT

– The child may think that he caused the death by having been angry with the person who died, or he may feel responsible for not having been “better” in some way.

ANXIETY and FEAR

– The child may wonder who will take care of him now or fear that some other person he loves will die. He may cling to his parents or ask other people who play an important role in his life if they love him.

REGRESSION

– The child may revert to behaviors he had previously outgrown, such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking.

SADNESS

– The child may show a decrease in activity – being “too quiet.”

It is important to remember that all of the reactions outlined above are normal expressions of grief in children. In the grief process, time is an important factor. Experts have said that six months after a significant death in a child’s life, normal routine should be resuming. If the child’s reaction seems to be prolonged, seeking professional advice of those who are familiar with the child (e.g., teachers, pediatricians, clergy) may be helpful.

EXPLANATIONS THAT MAY NOT HELP

Outlined below are explanations that adults may give a child hoping to explain why a person they loved has died. Unfortunately, simple but dishonest answers can only serve to increase the fear and uncertainty that the child is feeling. Children tend to be very literal – if an adult says that, “Grandpa died because he was old and tired” the child may wonder when he too will be too old; he certainly gets tired – what is tired enough to die?

- **Grandma will sleep in peace forever.** This explanation may result in the child’s fear of going to bed or to sleep.
- **“It is God’s will.”** The child will not understand a God who takes a loved one because he needs that person Himself; or “God took him because he was so good.” The child may decide to be bad so God won’t take him too.
- **Daddy went on a long trip and won’t be back for a long time.** The child may wonder why the person left without saying goodbye. Eventually he will realize Daddy isn’t coming back and feel that something he did caused Daddy to leave.

- “John was sick and went to the hospital where he died.” The child will need an explanation about “little” and “big” sicknesses. Otherwise, he may be extremely fearful if he or someone he loves has to go to the hospital in the future.

WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN

As in all situations, the best way to deal with children is honestly. Talk to the child in a language that he can understand. Remember to listen to the child and try to understand what the child is saying and, just as importantly, what he’s not saying. Children need to feel that the death is an open subject and that they can express their thoughts or questions as they arise. Below are just a few ways adults can help children face the death of someone close to them:

THE CHILD’S FIRST CONCERN MAY BE “WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF ME NOW?”

- Maintain usual routines as much as possible.
- Show affection and assure the child that those who love him still do and that they will take care of him.

THE CHILD WILL PROBABLY HAVE MANY QUESTIONS AND MAY NEED TO ASK THEM AGAIN AND AGAIN.

- Encourage the child to ask questions and give honest, simple answers that can be understood. Repeated questions require patience and continued expressions of caring.
- Answers should be based on the needs the child seems to be expressing, not necessarily on the exact words used.

THE CHILD WILL NOT KNOW APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR FOR THE SITUATION.

- Encourage the child to talk about his feelings and share with him how you feel. You are a model for how one expresses feelings. It is helpful to cry. It is not helpful to be told how one should or should not feel.
- Allow the child to express his caring for you. Loving is giving and taking.

THE CHILD MAY FEAR THAT HE ALSO MAY DIE OR THAT HE SOMEHOW CAUSED THE DEATH.

- Reassure the child about the cause of the death and explain that any thoughts he may have had about the person who died did not cause the death.
- Reassure him that this does not mean someone else he loves is likely to die soon.

THE CHILD MAY WISH TO BE A PART OF THE FAMILY RITUALS.

- Explain these to him and include him in deciding how he will participate. Remember that he should be prepared beforehand, told what to expect, and have a supporting adult with him. Do not force him to do anything he doesn’t feel comfortable doing.

THE CHILD MAY SHOW REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR.

- A common reaction to stress is to revert to an earlier stage of development. (For example, a child may begin thumb sucking, or bed-wetting; or may need to go back into diapers or have a bottle for a time.) Support the child in this and keep in mind that these regressions are temporary.

Adults can help prepare a child to deal with future losses of those who are significant by helping the child handle smaller losses through sharing their feelings when a pet dies or when death is discussed in a story or on television. In helping children understand and cope with death, remember four key concepts: be loving, be accepting, be truthful, and be consistent.

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