

Children & Grief - The Basics



Some definitions:

Grief: our internal reaction to a loss: thoughts, feelings, etc.

Mourning: how we show our grief on the outside, the outward expression of grief

Children and teenagers grieve much like adults, but they often mourn in different ways. Kids mourn more through behaviors than words--Instead of talking about their feelings, they act them out!

Children often grieve through their play. Play can be the most normal, natural, and healing response to grief.

Needs of children who are mourning:

1. To understand that the death/loss is real--to understand what "dead" means. This may happen a little at a time (in small doses), as the child develops and has more life experience. (Remember: truth is better than fiction).
2. To feel all of the feelings that come from the loss, including pain and sadness. They need to know that it is OK to cry, be sad, etc.
3. To remember the person who died--to see pictures and hear stories and talk about the person.
4. To develop a new self identity--Who are they now that this person has died? ex. If a child's younger sibling dies, are they still a big brother or sister? etc.
5. To search for meaning--why did this person die? What happens to people after they die?, etc.
6. To receive ongoing support and a stable environment

All children (and adults) will grieve in their own unique ways. Their grief will depend on: their age and developmental level, relationship with the deceased, previous experiences with death, the type of death, and MOST IMPORTANTLY: the adults that show them how to grieve.

Some common grief reactions in children and teens:

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 may 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."

Sadness: The child may show a decrease in activity - being "too quiet."

Guilt: The child may think that he caused the death by having been angry with the person who dies, 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.

How Can You Help?

1. Stay connected and able to observe the child

... Don't "push" or insist that they interact with you at one particular time ... keep checking in on how they doing with their thinking/feeling ... share with them the range of feelings you may be experiencing dealing with this tragedy (doing so gives them some words to use to describe their own experience(s). Keep open the possibilities to connect with you.

2. Offer to walk -- or drive -- or do some other physical activity which will allow you to have an "oblique" conversation with them. Sitting or walking side by side allows for a less pressured connection ... it turns down the intensity and allows some youngsters to have a greater sense of control and, therefore, more confidence to talk openly about very strong and often confusing thoughts and feelings.

3. Suggest some activity in which the youngster can engage -- particularly one which involves contact with another person. Making a piece of art work, crafting a poem, making a tape (audio or video), baking something for someone else all would be possibilities to consider.

4. Increase the amount of physical comfort you offer to your youngsters. Allow them to cuddle with you -- IF THEY WANT TO. (Don't force it, but invite it ... e.g., "Come sit beside me and watch this program ..." or "Come with me to Albertson's -- I'd enjoy your company.")

5. Affirm to your youngster how much you are pleased to have her/him in your life and how special he/she is to you. One cannot say such messages too often! Even if you have had "troubles" with the youngster ... acknowledge that you have had troubles, but go on to affirm your profound love for her/him and how much s/he means to you.

(Even if words are "not your thing", speak from the heart. If you are touching your youngster when you are speaking from the heart, your message will be emphasized.)

6. Create safe and healthy outlets for feelings.

Examples:

Anger: safe yelling (outside, into a pillow, etc.); safe hitting (punching bag, pillow, mattress); safe pounding (hammering nails into a board, hammering golf tees into foam blocks, etc.); safe kicking (soccer ball outside, martial arts, etc.); safe throwing (water balloons at a wall, eggs into a trash can, etc.)

Other emotions: journaling, singing, dancing, writing poetry, drawing, painting, sculpting, and PLAYING!

Create a safe environment by:

- ◆ Letting the child know that it is OK to cry, laugh, be angry, be confused, be happy, be scared, etc.
- ◆ Letting the child see you cry or be angry.
- ◆ Keeping routines as normal and regular as possible.
- ◆ Letting children be involved and included without pushing.
- ◆ Being aware of any changes in behavior.
- ◆ Being honest and open.
- ◆ Using books to help explain concepts.
- ◆ Reassuring children over and over that they did not cause the death or illness.
- ◆ Giving them a chance to keep things that are special to them--even if you don't understand why.