

Helping Children Cope with Grief

By Mary Hale

When children experience the death of a loved one, they grieve just as adults do. They may not be able to verbalize their grief. They may repress their feelings or express them through their behavior. They may seem not to be affected. But, they *are* grieving, often very deeply.

As parents or teachers, we often want to protect children from the pain of grief. If we see ourselves having difficulty dealing with the death, we wonder how a young child could possibly cope with it. So, we exclude children. We isolate them. We leave them on their own to answer their questions, to seek out the meaning of the death. As a result, many children facing such a significant loss feel bewildered, abandoned and all alone.

The way children learn to respond to death and loss early in life affects their reactions to future losses. If we, as adults, take the time to share with children their feelings when a pet dies, or to discuss the deaths they experience through books and television, we are helping to prepare them to handle the death of a significant person when it does occur.

Some Behaviors of Grieving Kids

Children may react to death in a variety of ways. Some will exhibit many of the following reactions, some only a few. Some will react immediately; some may have very delayed reactions.

Denial. “My mommy didn't *really* die.” When a child resumes play immediately or laughs inappropriately, it does not mean there is no feeling, but that the loss is simply too difficult to bear.

Anger & Hostility. “How could they die and leave me all alone like this?” “Why didn't Mommy and Daddy take better care of my baby brother?” “Why did God let my friend die?”

Guilt. “If I hadn't been such a bad little girl, my mommy wouldn't have died.” “I was mad at my brother – that's why he died!”

Panic. “Who will take care of me now?”

Clinging or Replacement. “Don't leave me, Mommy!” “Uncle Dave, do you love me as much as Daddy did?”

Bodily Distress & Anxiety. “I can't sleep.” “I feel sick just like my sister did before she died.”

Idealization. “Grandpa was perfect.”

Assume Mannerisms. “Don't I sound just like my daddy?”

Common Explanations That May Confuse Children

Some of the explanations we use with children can actually make the grief process more difficult or cause problems later in life:

“Your mother went on a long journey”

“Then why is everyone crying?” “Why didn't she say goodbye?” “I thought vacation trips were supposed to be fun.” “Daddy, please don't go away.”

“Your aunt was sick and had to go to the hospital.”

“If I get sick, will I go to the hospital and die, too?” “I don't want my sister to go to the hospital for an operation.” “The doctor is bad — *he* made Aunt Sue die!”

“It was God’s will.” “God was lonely and wanted your brother.” “He was so good that God wants him in heaven.”

“I'm lonely for my brother — I need him more than God does. God is mean!” “If God wants the *good* people, I'm going to be as bad as I can. I don't want to die.”

“Your grandfather went to sleep.”

“I don't want to go to bed.” “I'll make myself stay awake all night so I won't die too.”

Ways to Help Children Cope with Death

- Be direct, simple and honest. Explain truthfully what happened.
- Encourage the child to express feelings openly. Crying is normal and helpful.
- Accept the emotions and reactions the child expresses. Don't tell the child how he/she should feel or should not feel.
- Offer warmth and your physical presence and affections.
- Share your feelings with the child. Allow the child to comfort you.
- Be patient. Know that children need to hear “the story” and to ask the same questions again and again.
- Reassure the child that death is not contagious, that the death of one person does not mean the child or other loved ones will soon die.
- Maintain order, stability, and security in the child's life.
- Listen to what the child is telling or asking you, then respond according to the child's needs.

- Allow the child to make some decisions about participation in family rituals — for example visitation, the funeral, and socializing after the funeral. Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.
- With your loving and patient concern, the child will be better able to work through the grief process and to adjust to life without the deceased.

