

How to Help a Grieving Child

Grief is a Natural Reaction to Loss for Children of all Ages

Lowered grades, problems with peers and family members, drug and alcohol abuse, uncontrollable anger, and poor personal decisions have all been attributed to unrecognized grief in children and teens. Yet in this fast-moving culture which is uncomfortable with the subject of death, children and teens are often denied the opportunity to express their natural grief openly or at their own pace. Adults may want to shield them from the pain of grief and therefore exclude and isolate them when, in fact, they need just the opposite. Parents and teachers are often fooled into assuming that children and teens are doing just fine because they are not displaying strong emotions. In reality, they may be hiding a multitude of feelings like confusion, fear, anger, guilt, loneliness — many of the reactions which are well described in adults who are grieving.

Many children and teens want to understand and deal with their losses but do not know how and have no example from the adults in their lives. It is difficult for them to verbalize their feelings and this results in psychosomatic symptoms and behavioral problems that arise from their sense of insecurity and inability, or lack of encouragement, to share their feelings. In addition, they may not want to stand out in school, which dominates a large part of their lives, and so are often unwilling to talk about their experience there. They may not have the emotional vocabulary to express their grief even though their pain is very real. They often feel very alone and bewildered at a crucial time in their developmental lives, and the disenfranchisement of their grief might have lasting effects on their mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health later in life. It is, therefore, extremely important for young people to address their grief in a way that is comfortable for them.

How To Help

- False reassurance will not resolve fear, the most basic feeling of loss for a child or teen. Rather, it will add to the confusion and delay the process. It is very common for children and teens to be afraid of losing surviving family members. Fear of the unknown is true for all of us and especially for children who are likely to be facing a new experience. Fear of their own death or fear they may have contributed to the death of their loved one in some way, is often highly likely. Teens in particular may refuse to talk because they are afraid to bring up the subject of death, so they may withdraw and feel frozen in their fear. Sleep can be a problem, too, with recurrent nightmares. Grieving children and teens may show signs of regressive behavior. Fears must be addressed with honest and realistic reassurance.
- Maintain routines and boundaries as much as possible. Just as helping children work through their fears provides a sense of safety and security, so too does maintaining normal routines and setting normal limits. If at all possible, it is best not to make major changes, especially during the first year after the death.
- Understand that angry feelings are a natural reaction to loss and it is healthy to express them in a non-destructive way. “Acting out” is common with grieving children and teens, partly to

attract attention because they feel so confused and alone, and partly in an effort to overcome their fear with exaggerated displays of power and anger. Anger can be an antidote to fear and a feeling of vulnerability and is a way to feel in control (children and teens are often physical in their grief). It does not make sense to condone angry outbursts and acting out, but we do need to try to understand what is going on. At the same time, we need to explain that such behavior is unacceptable. Teens may use drugs or alcohol in an effort to numb their feelings. They may also use sexual promiscuity as a distraction.

- Try to listen and to answer questions as they arise. This may not be convenient for adults, but young children cannot always wait for an appropriate moment. We need to respect the uniqueness of their grief. Children and teens do not always express their grief through tears. Body distress such as stomach aches or sleeplessness can be caused by difficulty in expressing feelings.
- Encourage discussion about the person who died as much as possible and share photos and mementos. Make sure that the child or teen has something to keep that belonged to the person and has a photo of his/her own.
- Be patient with problems at school and at work. Talk to their teachers and other school staff so they understand what is going on and may be able to adjust expectations of productivity. Some children and teens try to overcome their feelings of helplessness by becoming over-achievers. Others have difficulty with concentration and it is common for grades to suffer. Attendance to grief often improves school performance as they feel understood and supported.
- Allow children and teens to make choices so that they participate in decisions (e.g. attending the funeral or gravesite). This helps them to feel valued.
- Be good role models by expressing feelings openly. This gives the child or teen permission to grieve in their own way. Learning to live healthily with loss enables children and teens to live life fully in the present and to be ready to embrace the future.
- Get outside support. Children and teens sometimes won't share with adults if they see that those adults are pained or troubled by what is told to them. Kids, therefore, need other places to go for support — both formal and informal.

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