

How Adults Can Help Grieving Children

The following guidelines are meant to be helpful and not intended to tell you what you “should” do. Everyone’s situation is unique, and when you are grieving you are doing the best you can. This summary comes from a variety of sources (listed below) as well as some embellishments from our experiences through the Grief Support Program for Children and Teens.

- Seek support and education to understand your own grief process. Grief is “the price we pay for love” and there are a myriad of physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological responses. Lack of attention to ourselves usually leads to projecting or placing our own thoughts, feelings and needs onto our children.
- Model healthy reactions to loss by expressing feelings and receiving support. How do children learn? We adults are important role models.
- Acknowledge the reality that grief hurts! Do not attempt to rescue the child or yourself from the hurt. Grief work is a healing process and it is work.
- At a time of loss children may feel frightened, insecure and helpless. They need additional love and support, but they also need structure in their daily routine. They need understanding and firm caring rules need not be abandoned. In fact, a routine provides a sense of continuity as well as a sense of security and stability, in what to the child may be, a pretty crazy world.
- When children experience death it is relatively common for them to think about it happening again, either to themselves or to someone else significant in their life. Especially in the case of one parent dying, they need to know who will take care of them if the other parent dies.
- Children need age appropriate information. They need an explanation as to the cause of death using the words die and dead. Our impulse is to overprotect. However, using vague terms like going away, sleep, or associating sickness with death only adds to the confusion. Also, honesty is the best policy. Do not tell a child something he or she will have to unlearn; not to mention the importance of trust in a relationship.
- Listen to a child’s response to your explanations as well as to the questions they ask. Ask them what they understood; ask for feedback about your approach, especially with older children, ask them what they need. It is important to listen and respect the child’s feelings and experiences.
- Do not close the door to doubt, questioning and differences of opinion. People within the same family will be in “different places”.
- Watch out for kids trying to protect grieving adults by assuming the caretaker role. Children can be quite supportive; however, children need to be children and grow up without adult responsibilities.
- Children will often need help in recognizing, naming, accepting, and expressing feelings. It is helpful to promote physical and creative activities for outlets. For example, kicking boxes, tearing up paper, writing, painting, yelling, throwing dishes (preferably ones purchased at a garage sale!).
- Children can learn about death and grief prior to the actual death of a loved one, e.g. death of a pet—how is this handled? Is the pain unbearable and the puppy replaced quickly? What does this teach the child about life and death?
- Share personal religious beliefs carefully. Children may fear or resent a God that takes to Heaven someone they love and need.
- Realize that a child’s grief may be difficult to recognize. Feelings may be expressed more in behavior than in words. Helplessness, despair, fear and anxiety may be acted out with aggressive behavior. Sometimes anger is directed at the safest person, often a surviving parent. It may not be conscious or rational but the child may feel that the parent should have prevented this tragedy.

- Anticipate and discuss expectable strains on relationships with family and peers. Individual family members, and the family as a whole, most often are establishing a new identity. The child may experience the discomfort of peers who are forced to confront the thought of death by their presence.
- Reassure children, especially younger ones, that they are not responsible for the person's death. All people die. Thoughts or words do not cause death.
- Parents need to know that once death is explained, it is not a closed subject. The topic will surface at very "interesting" times. Plus, grief lasts "longer than anyone expects". Children continue to deal with grief as they grow and mature. Significant "rites of passage", e.g. puberty, can be triggers for emotional reactions.
- It is a good idea to establish lines of communication with everyone involved with the child. Keep each other informed, e.g. grief usually causes difficulty concentrating. School work may be affected. The balance between understanding the affects of grief and setting realistic expectations can be discussed.
- Recognized the importance of rituals. Rituals allow you to channel your feelings and thoughts into an activity. They can make your feelings more manageable. It is often helpful to plan something at significant dates, e.g., holiday season, birthday, etc. Rituals can take several forms and can be very individual or done as a family, e.g. hanging a special ornament, lighting a candle, or setting aside a special time to remember.

Resources

Marge Heegaard, When Someone Very Special Dies. Woodland Press, 99 Woodland Circle, Minneapolis, MN 55424; 1988.

Ben Wolfe, St. Mary's Grief Support Center, 407 East Third Street, Duluth, MN 55805.

Darcie Sims, Big A and Company, P.O. Box *2032, Alburquerque, New Mexico, 87199.

Complied by: Fred Nelson
 Grief Support Program for Children and Teens
 St. Boniface General Hospital
 Department of Social Work
 409 Tache Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB R2H 2A6
 (204) 237-2344