



Understanding Your Child's Grief

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As adults, when someone close to us dies, we are oftentimes so caught up in our own grief, that we fail to recognize our children are grieving as well. It is not uncommon to feel at a loss on how to help children navigate their grief as you are in the midst of trying to charter your own.

No matter how young or how old, anyone who loses someone feels the loss. Our abilities to understand and express our feelings vary, but they still exist. Children will oftentimes hide their feelings in an effort to make the adults around them feel better. Children do not want to contribute to the sadness of their parents or siblings.

Children may even blame themselves for the person's death. They may feel abandoned by parents or others who are grieving. If they see parents crying over the death of a sibling, they may feel that the parents loved that child more than them and they should have been the one to die. Their feelings are oftentimes diverse and can be complicated.

The following tips provide insight into how children grieve and how to support them (adapted from Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.)

Learning about the Death

- News of the death should be delivered by someone close to the child. This individual should already have a stable, loving relationship with the child.
- Explain that the person's body no longer works the way it used to function. Their eyes cannot see, their ears cannot hear, they cannot breathe, their heart doesn't beat, they cannot feel and their brain cannot think.
- Don't try to say everything at once. Say only what your child can comprehend or wants to hear. Let your child set the pace of the conversation.
- In order to know how to help our children, we must first understand our own feelings about death.
- Use age appropriate terminology the child will understand.

How Children Grieve

- A child who is old enough to love is old enough to mourn.
- No child is too young to understand loss.
- Grief reactions may include:
 - Acting silly
 - Lack of concentration
 - Impulsivity
 - Acting out/explosive emotions
 - Apparent lack of feelings
- Just like adults, there is no "right or wrong way to grieve" and no two children will grieve the same.

Helping Children Grieve

- Let them know that it is okay to talk to you. If you wait for them to come to you, they may not.
- Listen to them, reassure them, give them attention, and hug them. Let them know they are loved and their grief counts.
- Use simple, honest, age appropriate language.
- Reassure children that nothing they did or did not do, said or did not say, was responsible for the death.
- Take care of yourself so that you can take care of the child.
- Let them know it is okay to be upset, angry, or sad.
- Give them safe outlets for their anger – a punching bag, a pillow, paper to rip.
- Give children opportunities to help.
- Help children memorialize the person who died, draw pictures, write notes, etc.
- Give them a journal or drawing pad. Tell them this is for them – they do not have to share anything they put into the notebook unless they want to.
- Return to routines as much as possible.
- Ask children what they'd like from you.

A child old enough to love is old enough to grieve. Even the smallest of babies know how to love.

We're here for you.

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