



Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Loved One

Often when a loved one dies, we can best help children by offering simple, but straightforward answers to their questions.

Vague answers often confuse children and increase their fears and uncertainty. Remember, children tend to take things literally. If we tell children that someone has gone on a long trip, they will expect that person to return and perhaps feel guilty that they drove the person away. When talking with children about death keep in mind that honesty, compassion and above all, love, are essential.

Here are some simple steps you can take to help your child:

- Talk with a child in language he or she can understand. Complex medical terms are less effective than simple language describing the illness or circumstances surrounding the death. Use language that reflects what the child can see, hear, touch, and feel.

Try to confirm that the child understands what you have said. Let the child explain back to you how he or she comprehends what has happened. Then help clarify any areas of confusion or misunderstanding that still exist.

- Allow time for a child to express his or her feelings and other grief reactions. Many grief reactions are typically associated with a serious illness or death in the family. These reactions can and should be shared among family members. Very young children may not have words for their grief. As a result, they may express their grief through drawings, behavior, or other means.

Encourage children to ask questions and be prepared to give honest, simple answers. Listen carefully to a child's questions and try to understand what is being asked, as well as what is not being asked.

- As an adult, be a good observer. Look and see how each child is behaving. Don't rush in with explanations. Usually, it's more helpful to ask exploring questions than to give quick answers.

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- Share your own feelings with children and encourage them to be open about theirs. Remember that you are their role model for how one goes about expressing grief. Expressing feelings of love is extremely beneficial at a time of loss.
- Recognize that each child will grieve differently. How they grieve is influenced by the responses of those close to them as well as by factors such as the circumstances surrounding the death, their relationship with the deceased, their developmental level, and temperament, and what they observe in others around them.
- Prepare children for the events that will occur during the first few days following the death. Explain funeral rituals as a way to say good-bye to their loved one. Let each child choose the extent of his or her participation in the funeral and other activities. Even very young children can benefit from participating in such events, but they should not be forced to attend. It may be helpful to assign them an adult “buddy” to help them should they need to leave the service or gathering.

Help the child commemorate the life of the person that has died. Sharing memories will help to facilitate healthy grieving. Creative writing, telling stories, planting the loved one’s favorite flowers, and other activities provide healthy outlets for grief and can be ways to maintain happy memories.

It helps to keep in mind that children are able to cope with grief and learn many important lessons by being embraced by their family and their community, and by being included in the important events that occur when a loved one dies.

References:

Helping Children Grieve When Someone They Love Dies by Theresa Huntley, Augsburg Fortress Publishers
Helping Children Cope with Grief by Alan D. Wolfelt.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Caring Connections

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