



## Helping Children Grieve

### General Guidelines

- Grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss. It is appropriate for children to be sad and experience pain and even extreme distress after a loss.
- Don't tell them to stop crying. Allow them ventilate and cry all they want and need to.
- Encourage a child to express their painful emotions and sadness freely, as keeping it all inside and unexpressed prevents them from completing their mourning and can create serious emotional problems later in life.
- Children need very much to feel all the pain and sorrow that a grievous loss merits. Never "smooth over" a child's grief. Listen to them. Try not to "fill up" their time.
- **Don't let the child grieve alone.** Include them in the storytelling and reminisces about the lost one. Encourage them to tell stories about times they spent with their loved one, both good times and bad. Let them contribute ideas for the memorial service, and even take part in the ceremony if possible.
- **Let them see the adults cry and grieve** so they will know that it is okay for them, too.
- **Share your grief** with children to build a connection. Shutting them out can create a separation. Talk openly and honestly about your lost one, express your sadness and pain. You send the child the message that it is okay to feel bad, and okay to talk about it. He'll feel safe to speak from the heart.
- **Do not expect a child to act like an adult** (e.g. "You need to be the man of the house now, and take care of your mother").
- It is just as important to **continue using the deceased person's name** in your home. Do NOT confuse the child by making the person's name taboo. Let it be okay to continue reminiscing about good and bad times spent with the lost one. Talking openly about the deceased is healthy and healing.
- **Encourage your child to ask any questions** he may have about the death, and look for clues as to the detail needed in your answer. They may be very curious about what happens to a body after a person dies. They may ask if she is cold, or hungry. Or, how does he go to the bathroom in that casket?
- **Answer honestly**; that once a person is dead, their heart and mind and body no longer works. They no longer breathe or talk or walk or move. Their body is no longer warm, but cold to the touch.

## Helping Children Grieve: Age Specific Guidelines

### Preschool (3-5 years)

- Explain death in simple and direct terms, providing only details they are able to comprehend.
- They think very literally, so don't use euphemisms like "went to sleep" or "the angels took her". Instead explain what really happened, that the body no longer works, and use the word "died" or "death".
- You may need to repeat explanations over and over, as they often ask the same questions again and again.
- Make sure they understand they were in no way responsible for the death by their thoughts; "magical thinking".
- Tell them they will not be abandoned, but will continue to be loved and cared for.
- Strive to provide consistent and familiar caretakers and daily routines.
- Be patient with regressive behavior; it should be temporary and improve with time.

### Middle School (6-9 years)

- Discuss the death, using the proper words "died" and "death". Provide only simple explanations in response to their questions. Tell the truth but don't overwhelm them with details they did not ask for.
- Acknowledge the importance of their feelings and encourage crying and other expressions of grief.
- Encourage discussion and let him know he can ask any questions at all and get honest answers from you (even about "unmentionables").
- Let them participate in memorial or commemorative activities and projects whenever possible.

### Preteen (10-12 years)

- Talk openly and honestly about the death and the body, **providing specifics as they are asked for.**
- Let them feel safe crying or expressing their grief to you. Share your own feelings of grief with them. It's okay to cry with them.
- Encourage expressions of grief through journal-writing, art, poetry, and music.
- Let the child create his own plans for a memorial celebration or special planting, how he wants to say goodbye.
- Go first in expressing your grief, for example, "Boy, I sure am sad that Grandma died. I will miss her funny jokes, won't you?"

## Teenagers

- Don't force a teen to talk about the death or grief, as they normally are reluctant to talk to adults.
- You may initiate a discussion by "going first" with how you feel about the death.
- Talk openly and honestly about it, while letting her know that no subject is off limits.
- Be a good, nonjudgmental listener. Acknowledging his grief without criticizing helps gain trust.
- Let her know it is perfectly normal to cry, and feel extreme sadness, guilt and regret.
- Contact bereavement support groups or a teen retreat if the child wants to participate. Peer group support can be most helpful for teenagers.
- Alternatively, encourage him to try a grief forum on the internet.
- Invite him to create or participate in a memorial ceremony commemorating the deceased.
- Artistic activities which may be very helpful for teens: creating memory boxes or quilts, journaling, writing poetry or songs, or scrapbooking.
- Watch carefully for any signs of serious suicidal tendencies or depression that worsens over time

Courtesy of: Rose Cottage Hand Along the Way program

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