



About Childhood Grief

The death of a significant loved one is a lifelong loss for a child, but it does not have to “derail” his or her future. It is normal for a child to miss the deceased and for feelings of grief to come and go with different levels of intensity for some time after the death. At the same time, it is frustrating when your child is hurting and, obviously, impacted emotionally and mentally, and you are unsure how to help him through his pain.



Here are a few suggestions about how to be helpful to a grieving child based on current practice among children’s grief support professionals.

Grief is a normal reaction for a child to the death of someone in his or her life. Grief is a reflection of our awareness that a significant change has happened. Someone who was an important part of our life is no longer here, whether the relationship with that person was caring and loving, or contentious and difficult. The death of someone in our life takes time to fully accept and even then, we continue to miss that person in our own special way. In truth, we do not “get over” a person’s death; we learn to live with it. Grief is not a problem we are trying to fix; it is an experience we are living. A child’s change in moods, or expression of grief, even several years out from a significant death, is a normal part of adapting to this significant change in their world.

Grieving children can handle the truth. Most parents would agree that they would prefer that their children not have to deal with the difficult truths that accompany a death. In a desire to protect our children, we might avoid words like “dead” or “die,” or we shade over the truth of “how” the person died. But, trying to protect our children from the harsh realities of death often creates other problems. Children, know more than we think they do and if they already know the truth of “how” a person died, but they see that no one is talking about it, they might assume the subject is “taboo” and in turn, be left alone to make sense out of it. Children are by nature ego-centric “magical thinkers”. Because of this, children often feel guilt over the death of someone in their life, believing

that they did something to cause the death (i.e. if I was more obedient they would not have died.) Honest answers build trust, help to provide understanding and allow children to feel comfortable approaching us with questions because they trust that we will tell them the truth.

Each child's grief is as unique to him or her as was their relationship with the deceased.

Because of this, everyone grieves in their own way. Some people have a need to talk about that



person and often retell the same story or explore the same questions, feelings or thoughts over and over. For some children, talking about the person who died is important. For others, they might not talk about the person, but might experience a variety of moods. And even others, might express their grief through art, play or writing. In whatever way your child might be experiencing their grief, these expressions are

how they are adapting to life without the physical presence of that person and adjusting to one of memories.

Grieving children often feel alone and misunderstood. Limiting your child's ability to experience grief in an authentic way can send a message to your child that they are "alone" in their grief. Children cannot be "talked" out of their grief, nor can their grief be "shut down" by avoiding conversations. Current research and practice in childhood bereavement teaches us that when children have the opportunity to grieve openly and share their feelings honestly, they feel less alone and in turn fare better than they would otherwise. When talking with your child, it is important to avoid seeing the conversation as a means to "fix" their grief, but see it as an opportunity to be present with your child in the moment you are sharing, talking about someone they deeply love and miss. Consider the possibility that your child is doing exactly what they need to do at that moment.

Children will experience grief over the death of significant people at different times throughout their lives. Many times, the intense feelings of grief will last longer and come more often than we think they should. In time, as children have opportunities to express their grief and to tell their stories, share memories and process what this death means, they might find the intense feelings come less often. But, grief is a lifelong journey and children often experience their grief on different levels and at different times throughout their lives. When a child gets their driver's license, scores a touchdown, goes to prom or graduates from high school, they might revisit their grief in a

very intense way. This extends into adulthood as well, when they have children of their own, or get married. Grief has no time limit. Allowing children to share openly about feelings can help to normalize this experience and help them find ways to deal with these intense feelings that will come and go and come back again.

Grieving children often experience personal “growth.” There has been much written lately about the experience of “post-traumatic growth.” These findings document that grieving people develop “virtues” as a result of their struggle. Many grieving children find that they are more compassionate toward others, value relationships with friends and family on a new level or experience a greater sense of appreciation for life in general. This personal “growth” does not diminish the sense of loss or grief a person feels, nor does it imply that the death of someone in their life was a “positive” experience. Personal growth, however, is often a by-product of going through the intense grief that accompanies a significant change in our life. Actually, current research and practice teaches that being able to openly experience grief and having the understanding and support of a parent or other loving adult, gives a child a “safe place” to make sense out of the death. It is important to be patient with your child as they experiences the ebbs and flows of grief and continue to make yourself available as a good listener when they need to talk or as a supportive presence when they just needs to be with someone else.

Grieving children feel less alone when they can be with other children who have experienced the death of a parent. Greater than any education, information or advice we can give to a grieving child is to allow a child to meet others going through a similar experience. When children meet others who have had a significant person in their life die, they



feel less alone. There are grief support programs, camps, groups and gatherings throughout the United States where children can interact and support one another. The National Alliance for Grieving Children has a directory of grief support programs across the country that can be found at www.ChildrenGrieve.org. Or, you can contact a local hospice program or others who provide support for grieving children and families to find out more about support programs near you.

Knowledge is Power. You do not have to be alone as the parent of a grieving child. There are many resources available via the internet and as mentioned above in the form of grief support for your child. Find encouragement and answers to some of your questions at these websites:

www.dougy.org

www.hellogrief.org

www.achildgrief.com

www.childrengrieve.org

The above listed websites contain the most recent information about supporting a grieving child. You can find books, articles and information that will increase your understanding of what behavior is normal for a grieving child and how you can “be there” for your child at this important time in their life and onward into their future.

References

Silverman, Phyllis R., Madelyn, Kelly (2009) *A Parent’s Guide to Raising Grieving Children*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Worden, William J. (1996) *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Wolfelt, AD (1996) *Healing the Bereaved Child*. CO: Companion Press.

Schuurman, Donna (2003) *Never the Same: Coming to Terms with the Death of a Parent*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press.

Emswiler, Mary Ann, Emswiler, James P. (2000) *Guiding Your Child through Grief*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Tedeschi, Richard, Calhoun, Lawrence G. (1999) *Facilitating Post Traumatic Growth*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth (1969) *On Death and Dying*. New York, NY: Scribner.

*Copyright © 2012 by **National Alliance for Grieving Children**. All rights reserved. You can quote, link to, re-post or translate this article, in its entirety, as long as you include the author name and a working link back to this website. **www.ChildrenGrieve.org***