

Tips for Parents & Care-providers: Helping a Grieving Child Cope

Children & Grief

Parents or other caregivers may feel uncertain about the best way to support grieving children. In our culture death isn't something that is talked about openly, so when there is a significant death in a child's life it can leave caring adults feeling unprepared about how to proceed. Trust your instincts and act naturally, your child will follow your lead and this is your opportunity to help them have a healthy and open perspective on life. Here are some other tips for supporting a grieving child.

1. **Talk and listen.** See handout "Talking to Children About Death". It is especially important to listen to your child without jumping in to "fix" the situation or tell them how to feel. Simply listen and reflect back to validate your child's feelings and experiences which will help them to feel more safe and in control.
2. **Involve your child and give them choices.** It is important to give your child the option of how much they would like to be involved in any rituals that take place following a death. Memorials and rituals are times for communities to come together and support one another, and times for children to learn about their culture. After providing your child with all of the details about what will happen at the funeral, for example, ask them whether or not they want to attend. If the child does want to attend, make sure they are prepared for what they will see and experience (the body will be there, people may be very upset, etc.) so they know what to expect. By including children in the choice they will feel more in control of the situation.
3. **Maintain daily routines.** Regular routines and rules provide a sense of comfort and familiarity to a child. Immediately following a death you may be home from work, children may be home from school, and the child's normal routine might be completely disrupted. Within reason try to keep things as normal as possible. If your child wants to go to school or over to a friends, allow them to do so. It is also important to uphold rules and expectations so that the child knows that things will calm down and return to "normal" in their daily life.
4. **Share your own grief.** Your child may look to you and other adults for cues as to how to they are supposed to be feeling and acting during this scary time. This is your opportunity to give them permission and acceptance to express their grief by your own honest expression of emotions. It's okay to cry and express negative emotions (within reason) in front of your child.
5. **Talk about and remember the person who died.** Remembering the person who died is a very important part of the healing process, and one way to do this is simply to talk about the person. Use their name and share what you remember, encouraging your child to do the same if they are comfortable. This helps the child to know that it is not "taboo" to talk about the person who died, which they may feel if people get uncomfortable every time they mention the person.

(Continued to next page.)

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(Continued from last page.)

6. **Remember that children express grief in different ways.** Everyone grieves differently. Children's grief looks different from that of adults, but it also looks different from child to child. Some children want to talk while others want to be left alone. Some like to stay busy and return to life as normal before the death while others may withdraw from activities and stay home. Children may cling to parents and caregivers, or spend time alone or with peers. Just as adults do during times of crisis your child may regress. Other examples of reactions are changing in eating/sleeping patterns, difficulty settling down and acting out behaviors.
7. **Encourage play.** Play is the language of childhood, and is one of the main ways that children express themselves. Give your child choices for self-expression, story-telling or pretend play using drawing materials, play dough, dolls/stuffed animals, games, books, etc. Children also need to take a break from their grief and play. Children may cycle in and out of play whether or not it is grief related. Give your child permission to laugh and have fun even though they are sad.
8. **Spend plenty of time with your child.** You are your child's first resource during a crisis. When their sense of security or safety has been threatened, they will look to you for comfort and reassurance. This may be especially difficult for teens and young adults during a time developmentally when they are breaking away from their parent and relying more and more on peers for support.
9. **Take care of yourself.** You must take care of yourself in order to take care of your children. Children are very perceptive and can read your face and body language even if you don't realize it. Seek support for yourself so that you are available to help your children. Modeling healthy coping such as relaxation techniques, exercise, spending time with family and friends sets a great example for your child as well.
10. **Keep a positive perspective.** You can teach the skills of resilience to your child by helping them realize that the journey of life has its ups and downs. Strive to be honest while maintaining a positive outlook.