

When a Child is grieving...

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Recently I heard of a young child who was about to pay a visit to Santa. “What are you going to ask Santa for?” she was asked. Her reply was, “I’m going to ask him to bring Grandma back.” For most adults it is difficult to imagine the questions children have when someone they love has died. Many of these questions remain unanswered because children are afraid to ask them. Furthermore, they will have questions which we can’t answer.

Adults may find it difficult to discuss death with children because their pain increases our pain. Because of this, children are hindered in their grieving.

The following is a list of reasons why this is so.

1. Children don’t always understand death or its implications for the family. One young boy told his mother that he wanted to go and be with his grandfather who had died. When she told him that if he went, he wouldn’t come back, he decided to stay here.
2. Young children don’t have the words in their vocabulary to describe their feelings, thoughts or memories. So their grief remains locked inside.
3. Children tend to take things literally. Therefore, it is important to say what we mean. People “die” they aren’t “lost.” If children are told that grandparents die because they are old, then they don’t understand why a playmate dies. “I thought only old people die.”
4. Children don’t have the same control over their lives that adults do. They can’t “get away for a weekend” after the funeral unless their parents take them.
5. Children don’t grieve intensely for long periods of time. If they don’t show signs of mourning, adults think they have made a quick recovery. Because of this, children are often left to grieve alone.
6. Parents may act to protect their children from death. In many cases children are excluded from the funeral and open discussion about the death is discouraged. This may hinder their ability to accept the reality of the death.
7. In many instances, children in the family are not told that a person who is sick is going to die. When the death occurs, the children aren’t prepared for it and for them it is a sudden death. A sudden death may complicate their grief.
8. Finally, children have poor role models. By this I mean, most adults have such a difficult time grieving that they are unable to teach their children by example.

As you can see, there are many reasons why children are hindered in their grieving and in their eventual recovery. When adults understand this, we will be better equipped to care for them when a death occurs in the family. Learn how you can help your child grieve.

How Do We Help The Children?

1. Begin to talk to them before the death occurs. This will give children an opportunity to ask questions and to prepare for what lies ahead.
2. Tell them the truth. If you don't, they will learn the truth eventually from schoolmates or by overhearing adults in the family talk.
3. Be simple. Tell them the basics and then answer their questions.
4. Provide a safe secure environment for them. It is a time of great insecurity for them, of asking questions and uncertainty of what the future holds for them and the family.
5. This is an ideal opportunity to encourage children to express their feelings. It is OK to cry.
6. Encourage them to talk about the person who has died. Help them to talk about how they are feeling.
7. Listen to what they are saying.
8. Encourage them, by example, to build a new life without the one who has died.
9. Be prepared to discuss the death within the religious, spiritual or philosophical framework of your family. Be willing to admit there are aspects about death and dying you don't know or understand.
10. Help the child adjust to the changes in responsibilities and routines that will occur in the family as a result of the death.
11. Allow a child time to be alone. Solitude is important.
12. Provide extra support in the case of a sudden death. Remember, if a child wasn't told of the impending death of a family member, then to the child, it is a sudden death.

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Activities:

Schoedinger provides compassionate care to our families... before, during and after the funeral. For some help with explaining death to your younger child, visit the Schoedinger website, www.schoedinger.com and click on the *Grief & Healing* tab and watch the video "Talking about Uncle Jack". Use the conversation between Elmo and his dad as a model. Let our friends from Sesame Street help you and your children better understand the wide range of feelings they may be experiencing through activities and discussion.



We would also like to suggest some other helpful activities that may allow children to express their feelings.

Drawing can be helpful way to express emotions without words.

- Give a child a piece of paper and have them draw a picture of a happy memory they have of the person who has died. Allow the child to display the drawing in your home or in a private place.
- Find a piece of paper and fold it in half. On one side, ask your child draw a picture of your family before the death. On the other side, ask your child to draw a picture of your family after the death. Ask the child to consider sharing their picture with someone who would understand.

Talking and patiently Listening can help your child express their feelings.

- Ask your child to finish the following sentences.

The thing that makes me feel the saddest is

If I could talk to the person who died I would ask....

Since the death my family doesn't....

My worst memory is....

If I could change things I would....

One thing that I liked to do with the person who died was...

When the person died I....

Since the death my friends....

After the death, school....

When I am alone....

Is there anyone you want to share this with?

Creating a Memory Box may comfort your child

- For some children, creating a memory box may be appropriate. Any small box can be used as a symbolic container for “memories” that remind the child of positive experiences with the deceased. Encourage your child to decorate the outside of the box using markers, paints and stickers. They may choose to keep photos of family, drawings, small objects and mementos or personal possessions of their loved one in this special box.

Older children may wish to express their thoughts and feelings through writing or music.

- Have a child write a letter to the person who has died. In the letter they can thank the person for their kindness, tell them how much they love him or her and say goodbye.
- Encourage your child to write a poem or a song to honor the life they shared with their loved one.

Remind your child that there are many feelings that we have when someone dies. It's different for everybody. There is no right or wrong way to feel. It's okay if you cry and it's okay if you don't cry. You may feel sad or angry or shocked or confused or nothing at all. You may hurt in your body or feel dizzy or tired. All feelings are normal.