

Children and Grief

Please feel free to duplicate the following as a resource as much as you wish (with author acknowledgement).

Many of us try to protect the innocence of childhood by limiting our children's exposure to death but, in actual fact, we are denying them the opportunity to learn about death as a natural part of living.

Children are curious. If they sense that death is a forbidden subject they will rely on their own imagination for answers or acquire misinformation from a variety of other sources. Popular culture becomes their teacher, and may portray death in direct conflict to the values and attitudes we want our children to have.

Using everyday occurrences to teach children about loss and death, when they are not directly involved emotionally; makes the information less dramatic for them to incorporate into their current understanding of the world. This in turn, prepares them for understanding death better when it does more directly impact them. It also teaches them that all life experience is an opportunity for sharing and learning.

Most children have never experienced the intense feelings that they do when a loved one dies and can only grieve for short periods of time. They appear to grieve less intensely than adults at first but often need longer to work through their grief. What may appear to be disrespect or lack of feeling is just a reflection of their developmental stage. Their coping skills differ from those of adults and include more distraction, fantasy, denial of the loss for periods of time and clinging to familiar activities or routines. Experiencing a loss in childhood may also affect a child's identity, because they are still developing a sense of who they are and how they fit in the world.

When a death occurs, children are often confused about what is happening and why it is happening. Often their first reactions are to wonder "Did I make this happen? Will I die too? Who will take care of me?" .

Children are best supported through their grieving process by adults who offer them understanding, compassion and respect in a sharing, open and honest style of communication. Tone of voice, eye contact, physical contact and facial expressions all convey cues to help teach children how to grieve. Suggestions for talking with children about death are:

1. Talk openly and honestly.
2. Use age appropriate explanations.
3. Tell them the truth. If a loved one is dying or has died, share this information with the child immediately; using simple, direct, terms.
4. Reassure them they are still cared for.
5. Listen to them and learn from them.
6. Respond to their questions in a calm manner.

7. Encourage them to talk about the loved one who has died.
8. Encourage them to talk about the death and their feelings.
9. Reassure them that they are not to blame for the death.
10. Reassure them that feelings are not right or wrong, but just are, and that it's okay to share them. Let them observe adults who are grieving. Let them know that they will not always feel so sad and hurt.
11. Give children the choice of whether to attend the funeral home and the funeral or memorial service. Explain what the service is for, what will happen, and who will be there. Allowing the child to participate affirms the child's attachment to family and the wider community and helps them make sense of the death.
12. Continue to set reasonable, consistent limits on behaviour.
13. Remember that they are children and can't assume adult responsibilities.
14. Children of the same age will often understand and react differently to death, so set aside expectations concerning their grief, and be patient.
15. Honour the relationship the child has had with the loved one by encouraging the child to continue the relationship through memories and rituals.
16. Expect children's attitudes and understanding to mature with age.
17. Make death education an ongoing natural part of relating to children by using "teachable" moments, arising out of ordinary life experiences, to encourage open, respectful, sensitive discussion.

To effectively support children in their grief, we must become perceptive about the types of losses that occur for a child and the level of importance they may play for the specific child involved and be open to learning about death from children. Above all we must come to recognize the value of sharing the death-related experience with children and respond to their questions in the spirit in which they have been asked.

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