

## Grief and Loss Tips - Supporting Children through Grief

*"A Good Friend for Bad Times: Helping Others Through Grief"*

*By Deborah E. Bowen, MSW, LCSW and Susan L. Strickler, M.Ed.*

Children grieve differently than adults. While children share the same grief emotions as adults, they often express them differently. For example, an adult may be able to express anger verbally, while a child may do so through drawing pictures. Children also grieve in spurts. One minute a child can be sad and crying in his room, and the next he's outside happily playing baseball. Children at each age grieve differently from other ages. Outlined below is how children in different age ranges view death; however, keep in mind that factors other than age influence how a child grieves: intelligence, previous experience with death, family environment, religion, and culture also determine grief behaviors in children.

### How Children Grieve at Different Ages

- **Three to Five Years Old.** Children at this age often think death is reversible. Magical thinking is common. If the princess can awaken from a long sleep, so can grandfather awaken from death. It is important to tell children that death is permanent, and that their loved one will not come back.
- **Six to Ten Years Old.** By this age, children understand that death is final. They begin to realize that they, too, can die. They need to be told that just because a loved one died, they are not necessarily going to die. Children in this age range are media-savvy and are aware of murders and kidnappings committed against children. They need to be made to feel safe and protected. They need simple, honest information.
- **Eleven to Thirteen Years Old.** Children in this age range have a realistic view of death, but refuse to believe death can happen to them. They share adult grief emotions, but often are overwhelmed by these feelings. They tend to move in and out of grief.
- **Teenagers.** Teenagers may either internalize grief or act out grief emotions in inappropriate or dangerous ways. Those who internalize grief may lead adults around them to think they are handling grief well. Look for grief emotions to sneak out, expressed in poetry, art, and music. Some teenagers act out their grief in destructive ways, such as driving recklessly, fighting in school, experimenting with drugs and alcohol, and engaging in sexual behaviors. Regardless of how a teenager grieves, help from an adult is needed. If grief becomes pathological, seek counseling with a trained mental health professional.

### Should Children Attend the Funeral or Memorial Service?

If a child is old enough to express his desire to attend, let him do so. Attending the service may help the child understand the finality of death, and may assist him in celebrating and mourning the death of a loved one. Explain to the child in advance of

the service what he can expect to see and hear. Tell him you will be there to hold his hand.

If a child states that he does *not* want to attend, do not force him. Be sure, however, that the child has all the facts about the service, and pay attention to any fears the child may express. You can offer to visit the cemetery with the child later.

### Explaining Cremation

Cremation is often more difficult to explain to a child than burial. Keep your explanation simple. Do not use words such as *fire* and *burn*, which may frighten the child. Explain that the body was taken to a crematory where it went through a special process so that it was reduced to something that looks like sand. Mention that the ashes were put in a container called an urn, and then explain what the family plans to do with the urn.

If you are a friend to a child who is grieving, there are many ways in which you can help the child process emotions. Listed below are some things to do or not do.

### What to Say and Do

- Keep routines as normal as possible.
- Say the deceased person's name.
- Talk about the person who died. Keep memories alive by looking at photos, recognizing holidays and anniversaries, and commemorating the person.
- Provide the child with opportunities to express feelings. These feelings may include guilt, anger, sadness, confusion, or anxiety. Listen and give your support to the idea that it is acceptable to express emotions.
- Be patient and adjust your behaviors to fit the child's needs.
- If a child becomes aggressive, try to channel his behaviors so that he understands what behaviors are acceptable, what behavioral limits are, and that he is cared for and safe.
- Share your feelings with the child. If you cry, explain your sadness to the child.
- Model appropriate grief behavior. Express your own emotions in a healthy way.

### What *Not* to Say and Do

- Avoid euphemisms such as *passed away*, *gone on a journey*, and *asleep*. Children may take these terms literally. Be honest.
- Do not say, "God loved your mother so much that God sent her to heaven." A child may feel that he, too, may die if he is good.
- Do not say, "It was God's will." Regardless of what you as an adult believe about spirituality and death, such a statement may negatively shape a child's view of God and spirituality.
- Do not say, "It was best your mother died because she is no longer suffering." Perhaps a child would rather have a suffering mother than none at all.

- Do not say, "You're the man of the house now." The child is still a child, and should not be saddled with adult responsibilities. Also, the child cannot take the place of someone who has died.
- Do not say, "You must be brave" Children do not have to be brave. They should be allowed to express emotions, and to know that such expression is acceptable. Do not say, "You're doing so well" (if the child is not expressing emotion). Saying this may tell a child expression of emotions is not acceptable.
- Do not say, "You should be better by now." There is no timetable for grief.
- If a child's behavior becomes regressive, do not criticize the child. Regressive behaviors such as bed-wetting, and thumb-sucking are common after death.