

HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH GRIEF

Previous Grinnell Regional Hospice bereavement newsletters focus upon understanding and coping with your personal journey through grief. This newsletter provides information about how children cope with grief and how to help them with their grief journey. Many times we seek to protect children from pain and grief by not including them in the rituals that occur when someone dies. Adults sometimes believe that children may not understand what is occurring. They also assume that children may be disruptive to others. Actually, participating in family rituals provides important information to children about their families and how to cope with loss. The presence of children can also be very supportive to the bereaved. Children bring a special energy, tenderness, joy, and hope for the future to those they love.

A child's understanding of death is primarily affected by their age (stage of development) and their prior experiences with death. A table included in this newsletter provides information about how children of differing ages may think and behave after a death. Remember that each child will have a unique response to the death. Other factors that will influence the child's responses are

- ♥ their relationship with the person who has died. The closer they felt to that person, the more intense their response will be.
- ♥ the impact of the death upon the child's life - how disruptive it is to their daily routines.
- ♥ the response of other family members to the death.

Those who have studied childhood grief have identified four psychological tasks that children must complete on their journey through grief. The first task is *understanding*. The child needs to understand the cause and meaning of death. Three factors may interfere with a child's completing this task. They are the way adults explain the death, the child's developmental limitations, and the child's belief that somehow he or she caused the death. Children may believe they are more powerful than they truly are. Children are very literal and concrete. Consequently, it is important to explain death to them in very literal and concrete terms. "Grandpa died last night" is more understandable to them than "God wanted Grandpa to come be with Him" or "Grandpa has gone away." Euphemisms such as "passed away" and "went to heaven" serve to confuse children and to heighten their fears. As young children mature, they may have to rework this task of grief multiple times. Children who are blaming themselves for the death of their loved ones need reassurance that their anger, thoughts, words, and other behaviors did not cause the death.

The second task is grieving. Children need to identify, express, and share their reactions to the loss of their loved one. Invite the children in your family to talk about the person who has died. Children can move through the healing process by talking about the events that preceded the death and what they liked and disliked about the person who died. Children who cannot talk or find it hard to talk can be encouraged to draw pictures or play out their feelings using toys. Music and books are also good tools to use as you help the children in your family grieve.

The third task of childhood grief is *commemoration*. Despite their death, loved ones live on in our hearts and memories. Include children in any family commemorations of their loved one. Assist them with creating a memory book or memory box about the person who died. They can select small items, choose pictures, draw pictures, and write stories about their loved one to keep in a special place.

Some categories of memory items to collect might include something funny, sad, or memorable their loved one said or did. It might also include their loved one's favorite things, places they enjoyed together, and games they played. Planting a special tree or flowers can give the child something concrete to remember. Helping the child create a small "shrine" may be comforting to a child. The shrine could include pictures and small things their loved one owned or gave to them.

The fourth task is *going on*. Just as adults must rebuild their lives after the death of a loved one, so must children. One of the best ways to help children with this task is to recognize and accept their unique way of grieving. Provide them with opportunities to learn about grief and the normalcy of their feelings and responses. Recognize that in some ways children grieve longer than adults. Children who lose a parent or sibling may need to "redo" some tasks of grieving with each developmental stage - perhaps even into adulthood.

A special word about teens. Immediately following the death of a loved one, teens will often appear to be coping "exceptionally well" with their loss. They may go about their daily routines as if nothing unusual has happened. They may be especially solicitous of others - "taking care of them." Their outward grief responses may be delayed as long as six months to a year. Often another "smaller" loss will finally trigger their grief response to the death of their loved one. All you can do is support them and be watchful for opportunities to talk with them.

Symptoms such as eating and/or sleeping disturbances over a long period of time, misbehavior in school, poor school performance, frequent stomachaches, headaches, or fatigue are signs that your child may need professional help. Have the child see his/her physician for a check up. A grief support group may be helpful for the child. Seek pastoral or family counseling if symptoms persist. Don't blame yourself if you cannot be fully there for your child during this time. Your personal grief and accomplishing the daily tasks of living take tremendous emotional energy. Professional counselors may be your best allies in helping your child deal with his/her grief.

In review, here is a list of suggestions to help a child through the grief process:

1. Set time aside to talk with the child. Explain the events and why the family is crying. Let your child vent his/her emotions and acknowledge them.
2. Use basic words like "die" and "dead" to convey the message. Avoid phrases that "soften the blow:" Phrases such as "sleeping," "went on vacation," or "God took them" will only confuse and scare a child. The more direct you are, the less the child's confusion. Young children take things quite literally. Saying that the dead person is sleeping may result in fears of going to sleep at night and/or sleeping alone. Saying that the deceased has gone to live in Heaven or be with Jesus may suggest to the child that the person had a choice in the matter. We need to help children understand that the deceased loved them and did not choose to die.

3. Use the deceased person's name when referring to him or her.
4. Let the child ask questions - and answer truthfully! Be honest, simple, and direct. If you don't understand something, let the child know.
5. Be sensitive to the age of the child and his/her level of understanding. Do not offer information beyond the child's comprehension because it will only confuse matters.
6. Read or have your child read children's books related to death. Read books yourself on helping children through grief. Several books are listed later in this newsletter.
7. Play with the child using dolls, drawing, or imagining that might allow the child to express his/her feelings.
8. Watch for TV programs that might help the child's understanding.
9. Share your feelings and experiences with the child if she/he is able to understand them.
10. You are the role model for the child. If you hide your grief, the child will learn to hide his or hers as well.
11. Plan something fun that you and the child can anticipate together.
12. Use examples in nature to help the child understand that death eventually occurs to all living things.

If a child can love; a child can grieve.

AGE	THINKING	BEHAVIOR
Teens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Abstract thinkers ● Able to view death on an adult level (usually) ● See death as universal, inevitable. ● Immortal attitude - Death happens to others ● Will have to conquer death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Act like they don't need help ● May not want to talk about the death ● Try to hide their feelings ● May respond by trying to take care for others

Factors That Can Inhibit Grieving in Children
By Therese Rando

● The surviving parent's inability to mourn.	● Unchallenged magical thinking.
● The surviving parent's inability to tolerate the pain of the child, which allows the child to mourn.	● An inability to put thoughts, feelings, and memories into words.
● Fear about the vulnerability of the surviving parent and the security of the self.	● Issues of adolescence that exacerbate normal conflicts in mourning.
● The lack of security of a caring environment.	● Cognitive inability to accept the finality and irreversibility of the death.
● The lack of a caring adult who can stimulate and support the mourning process.	● Lack of opportunities to share longing, feelings, and also memories.
● Confusion about the death and his/her part in it.	● Instability of family life after the loss.
● Ambivalence towards the deceased	● Reassignment of an inappropriate role and responsibility.

CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO DEATH

AGE	THINKING	BEHAVIOR
Newborn - Age 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senses changes in the atmosphere, at home and the daily routine • Reacts to emotions of caregivers 	<p>May respond with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability • Change in sleep and eating patterns
Age 2 - 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not accept death • Think death is reversible • May think they caused the death • Think death is punishment for being "bad" • Fears separation and abandonment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking and temper tantrums • Clinging and anger • Ask about dead person's return
Age 6 - 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to understand that death is final • Understand that they, too, will eventually die • May think that death is contagious • May deny that death happened • Literal and concrete thinker • Looks for natural explanations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need more details about how the person died • May "personify" death such as ghost or monster who comes after you • May display anger and have difficulty with concentrating on tasks
Age 9 - 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to develop a fuller understanding of death • May view death as punishment • Interested in physical aspects of dying • See death as final 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May express concerns about how the death will affect them regarding finances and lifestyle. • May become more aggressive • May withdraw from others and try to hide feelings

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

GRANDPA AND ME, Marlee and Benny Alex

The fact of death is always with us. But how do we explain it to our children? This story is about Emma and her first encounter with death - first the death of a kitten and later the death of her grandfather. Emma's questions are answered honestly and straightforwardly, with sensitivity and compassion. This book explains to a child our understanding of death - its sadness and grief. It also gives a Christian perspective, showing that there is hope and happiness too.

WHEN PEOPLE DIE, Joanne, Gullo and Stephen Bernstein

In simple terms, the book explains reasons for death, theories on afterlife, burial practices, and naturalness of death in the chain of life.

THE FALL OF FREDDY THE LEAF, Leo Buscalia

Shows the life cycle through nature.

THE ACCIDENT, Carol Carrick

After his dog is hit by a truck, a boy must deal with the guilt and grief.

EVERETT ANDERSON'S GOODBYE, Lucille Clifton

A young boy struggles with the emotional stages from denial to acceptance in coming to grips with his father's death.

NANA UPSTAIRS, AND NANA DOWNSTAIRS, Tomle DePaola

A loving story of a young boy experiencing his great-grandmother's death and how this prepares him for his grandmother's death when he is grown.

GOOD-BYE, GRANDPA, Ron Koch

Joey tries to run away from death - then faces it and gains new understanding of life.

HOW IT FEELS WHEN A PARENT DIES, Jill Krementz

This collection of moving and completely believable statements of 18 bereaved children in their own words. These words will be deeply valuable to other bereaved children - and also to the surviving parent and relatives. It will comfort them deeply to hear how others went through the same loss.

LEARNING TO SAY GOODBYE, Eda LeShan

Discusses questions and fears many young people have when someone close to them dies.

MY BROTHER JOEY DIED, Gloria McLendon

A child goes through the sudden illness and death of a brother.

WHY DID GRANDMA DIE?, Trudy Madler

Heidi tries to accept her grief by attending her grandmother's funeral and by talking to others.

AARVY AARDVARK FINDS HOPE, Donna Otoole

A read-aloud story for people of all ages about loving and losing, friendship and hope

THE SADDEST TIME, Jacqueline Rogers.

Three stories telling about the death of an uncle, a friend, and a grandmother

IT MUST HURT ALOT, Doris Sanford

A book about death and learning and growing.

ABOUT DYING, Sara Bonnett Stein

This book is designed with separate texts for the adult and child. Vivid photographs and a simple, honest text unfold the story for the child, while parents and teachers can follow an accompanying text that provides more specific detail.

OTHER RESOURCES

Amanda the Panda: This organization conducts annual free camps for grieving children, teens, adults, and college students. For further information contact:

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We're here for you when you need us.