

Child Bereavement

A commonly held misbelief is that children do not understand death nor have the ability to mourn. They quickly shift from periods of playfulness and activity to moments of being withdrawn or upset. Parents view this as the child being unaffected by the loss. In reality, bereaved children, like adults, endure a wide range of feelings and require the support from trusted adults around them.

WHAT DO I SAY WHEN A CHILD ASKS ABOUT DEATH?

Children are more aware than we think and can sense when something is wrong. It is important that they remain informed in order to work through their grief at the same time as the rest of the family. This will prevent feelings of isolation, promote trust and encourage sharing. The following are points to keep in mind when explaining death to children:

- **Be honest**

- ✦ Use simple, age-appropriate explanations.
- ✦ Do not be afraid to use the words *dead* or *die*.
- ✦ Explanations such as “gone to heaven”, “going to sleep” and “going on a long trip” cause confusion and anxiety as they may be taken literally. The child may be afraid to take a nap or might start behaving badly so that he/she does not get sent to heaven.

- **Open communication**

- ✦ Be open to discussion and actively listen to the child; this includes good eye contact and body language.
- ✦ Let the topic of death be an ongoing discussion. Children experience grief intermittently and may go through emotional periods at later times.
- ✦ Let the child know they are being understood and taken seriously. It is not helpful for the adult to be all-knowing. Take the role of the “observer” and listen to the child’s needs and concerns.

- **Confirm that the child *understands***

- ✦ Ask the child to repeat what they have learned. Children have creative imaginations and may not be able to distinguish the reality from the fantasy. This can lead to confusion and fears surrounding death.

- **Introduce the topic of death *before* the loss of a loved one.**

- ✦ This can be in the context of a broken toy, a pet dying or something seen on television. Bringing up death in everyday circumstances provides the child with needed exposure and important lessons that can be used in the future. Use the life cycle found in nature, plants, insects, animals. Recommended reading is “Lifetimes” by Mellonie & Ingpen.

STAGES IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT:

Although there are common characteristics among children who are grieving, there is no definite sequence of events that a child must pass through in order to resolve a loss. It is important to accept where the child is in terms of his/her own personal bereavement process.

• **Infants/Toddlers (0-2 years)**

- ✦ Learn from nonverbal forms of communication.
- ✦ They sense distress from facial expressions and body language of adults around them; they can tell when something is wrong.
- ✦ Express grief through crying excessively, irritability or changes in regular routine (sleeping, feeding).
- Try to maintain daily structure and provide extra physical comfort.
- Spend extra cuddling time to ensure the child of your continued love.

• **Preschool (3-5 years)**

- ✦ Recognize a separation from the loved one but believe it is reversible and temporary.
- ✦ Think that they will catch the same disease or that all sicknesses lead to death. This can be seen in a fear of doctors' appointments.
- Offer honest explanations and help them understand their feelings (they may not be able to describe what they are experiencing).

• **Elementary (6-11 years)**

- ✦ Permanency of death is understood.
- ✦ View death as only happening to seniors or in accidents.
- ✦ May believe that the death was their fault or a punishment for something they did: feel worried and guilty.
- ✦ Withdraw socially, suffer in school, and do not want to participate in usual extracurricular activities.
- ✦ Act out through anger and defiance.
- Give the child time to work through their grief before they are expected to return to their usual routine.
- Help the child find alternatives in expressing feelings such as physical activity to release tension.

TIPS FOR ADULTS SUPPORTING A GRIEVING CHILD

• **Include the child in caring for the loved one who is dying.**

Activities such as making a gift, writing a letter, reading a book or help cooking a meal can be used to relieve a child's feelings of anxiety or guilt.

• **Minimize changes.**

Maintaining a family routine will provide a stable environment where the child can feel safe and supported. Sports practices, recitals, or birthday parties may be important to the child. Let them continue to be a part of these activities; it may be more stressful for them to miss out. As well, try not to overwhelm the child with extra responsibilities and adjustments.

• **Recognize children's nonverbal communication.**

Children communicate feelings through actions more than words and their behavior serves as an important indicator of their grief. For example, in creative projects (art, writing) or the way they interact with peers (play time). Their verbal expression may be inconsistent with the emotions they are actually experiencing.

• **Provide reassurance.**

Reassure the child that they are not responsible for the loved one's illness or death. Even though it is frightening to see adults grieving, remind children that they will be loved and cared for.

• **Let the child play the role of the teacher.**

Don't assume that you know what the child is feeling or that there is a certain length to their grief period. Let them teach you what their grief process is like.

- **Allow the child to be included in the funeral ritual.**

Involve children in the decision of whether they should attend the funeral and inform them of what they are expected to hear and see. This gives the child the chance to share their grief with their family; if left out, they may feel isolated.

- **Be a role model.**

Do not be afraid to cry or express feelings of grief in front of a child. Being honest with your own grief will inform the child that those feelings and reactions to loss are normal and expected.

- **Encourage expression of emotions**

Children may need permission to grieve, and this can be done by initiating conversation and showing that you understand. Let the child know that it is normal to be feeling sad or different, and that this grief might be around for a while, but not forever.

- **Allow children to grieve according to their own timetable.**

Most children are not able to handle the pain of the loss all at once and instead will grieve intermittently. This means at times they will be acting as if the death never happened (for example, playing and laughing with friends) while at other times they may be more solitary and upset. Expect that aspects of the grief will appear at later stages in their development as they mature.

- **Help young children remember the deceased.**

Photos, videos, letters, and observing important dates (such as birthdays) can be used to help the child recall memories. Reinforce the love and caring relationship between the child and the deceased (using stories or mementos).

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