

What Grieving Children Need

1. Children need honesty. Tell children the truth about their loved one's death and how it happened in ways that they can understand. Keep it simple, but be truthful. Children have the uncanny ability to sense when something is not right. When you keep the truth from them, they feel alone and cut off from you. When that happens, they are left to their own devices: their imagination, which can be much worse than reality. Children can deal with reality, but the unknown is frightening. Later when the truth does come out (and it always does), they feel betrayed. Be honest.

Part of this honesty includes being direct about what it means to be dead. Use the word "dead" and say what that means: "Her body does not work anymore. She is not breathing anymore. Her heart is not working. She cannot eat, sleep, move, or feel anymore. She is dead." Avoid euphemisms, such as "passed away", "sleeping peacefully", and "gone". These confuse children and create the false belief that their loved one may return.

2. Children need to feel included and connected. Children need to experience a sense of family, and know that they are an important part of it. This can be extremely difficult when each member is racked with their own grief, yet children need to know they still belong.

3. Children need choices about their participation. Children deal much better with loss when they are given choices, and allowed to participate, or not, in what is happening. Take the funeral/memorial service, for example. Children should be given a choice about whether or not they would like to attend. (In order to make that choice, they need to be informed about the service: what will happen, what they will see and hear, who will be there, etc. If they will view their loved one's body, they need to be prepared as to what the person will look and feel like.) They should not be forced to go if they do not choose to, and should not be left out if they wish to go. Have a trusted, yet flexible adult available just for the children, in case they need to leave early, need reassurance, or require some other special attention. If a child does not attend the service, they will need other means to say "good-bye" to their loved one. (Even those who do attend, may need other means to say "good-bye" that are more age-appropriate and meaningful.)

4. Children need permission to grieve. Explain grief: It is our many reactions to the death of someone we love. Let children know it is natural to have many feelings and other reactions when someone dies. Give them permission to feel as they do, and to talk about it if they wish. Tell them that you will be there for them, and are willing to listen, give them a hug, or help them create their own memorials and rituals. Children often love rituals and remembering. These provide an excellent outlet for their grief, especially if they are allowed to help plan the ritual.

Be real about your own feelings. Children look to their caregivers for cues about how to behave in a given situation. If you are worried that your child is not grieving, examine your own grief expression. Are you trying to control your own grief for their sake, therefore keeping it hidden? If so, you may inadvertently be giving a message that it is not okay to grieve. Be real. It is okay to let a child see that you are sad. At the same time, they need to know that while you are sad, that you are going to be okay.



5. Children need consistent limits and rules. The death of a loved one creates chaos in a child's world. Often, parents and caregivers, in their compassion, attempt to compensate for what the child has lost. This compensation often results in slacking off on limits and rules. This causes more harm than good. Limits and rules give the child the necessary parameters for understanding his/her world, which lend to a sense of safety and security. When all else feels out of control, rules and limits provide a feeling of control and safety for children. Therefore, it is essential to maintain the same rules and limits that were in place before the death occurred.

6. Children need reassurance. Grief and mourning are a normal part of life, and it will take time for any family to re-establish its equilibrium again. During this period of transition, children need reassurance that: 1) they are loved, 2) they are an important part of the family, 3) the family will get through the loss together, and 4) they did not cause the death (children often blame themselves for negative events).

Children's grief looks very different from adults. They can be crying one minute, and off playing and having fun the next. **This does not mean they are not impacted by a loss.** It simply means that children can only deal with grief so long, and must take breaks. Also, remember that children do not have the intellectual or verbal capacity that adults do. As a result, children's grief is often disregarded or overlooked.

At-risk indicators - Be alert to the following problems that may indicate your child needs help:

- Personality change
- Change in school performance
- Withdrawal
- Giving away treasured belongings
- Saying good-bye to loved ones
- Loss of interest in activities, friends, or things once enjoyed
- Sleep or appetite disturbance
- Drug/alcohol use
- Sexual acting out

Suggested reading for children: "Nadia the Willful," by Sue Alexander, is a sweet book for the whole family. After Nadia's beloved brother dies, she discovers how to keep him alive in her heart.