

Helping the Young Child Deal With Grief

By Linda Chiara

The loss of a loved one can be painful and confusing. Children start to realize, perhaps for the first time, the concept of mortality. Struggling to find an acceptable way to address their fears, young children aren't able to articulate how the loss affects them. As parents dealing with our own grief, we may minimize their pain. Yet their grief is as real and painful as ours. Here are ten ways to help a child deal with the sadness.

Talk Honestly

Use language geared to the child's age level. But be careful about how you phrase your thoughts. Don't say, "Grandpa went to sleep forever." This statement can cause children to associate sleep with dying. Also, telling a child that grandpa is on a long trip may seem like a good solution for the short-term, but will eventually backfire. A child may wonder if grandpa's not returning because the child did something wrong or because grandpa doesn't love him or her anymore. Although this is a good time to present religious beliefs, don't say, "Grandpa was so good that God took him to live in Heaven." A child will equate good behavior with dying. Instead, tell a child that the natural order of things is that when people get very, very old, they die.

Listen

Let your child talk and talk and talk. Be patient. Children need someone to listen to their fears. Also, don't dismiss a child's sorrow even if it was the death of a turtle or fish that caused the grief. For a first time death experience, the loss of a hamster is as heartbreaking to a child as the loss of a friend is to you.

Let Them Ask Questions

Some children will think about a question for months before asking. Others will ask the same questions continually for weeks. Many times, the child is asking questions in a round-about way because he or she is experiencing guilt. Young children think their wishes are powerful. If a child had been angry at the person before he or she died, the child might feel that his or her anger caused the death. Look for hidden clues in a child's questions, if your answers don't totally satisfy him or her. Again, remember to stress that most people die because they are very sick or very old.

Let Them See You Cry

A parent who stops crying and puts on a smile every time a child enters the room gives the wrong message. Crying and feeling sad are necessary for healing.

Let Them Attend the Funerals, if Appropriate

A child over the age of six can usually handle the ceremony and will most likely learn by watching how he or she can deal with grief. Remember, the funeral is not for the dead, but for the living. All of us need to say goodbye.

Have a Memorial Service

If attending the funeral is not possible, have a memorial service. Take the children to a park, stand together in a circle and say something loving about the deceased. Then release into the sky balloons that have notes to or drawings of the deceased. This simple act can help a child begin the healing process.

Read Books Dealing With Death

A child will learn that he or she is not the only one experiencing these feelings of grief. *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst (Atheneum) is an example of a book that lets a child see that as long as we remember good things about our loved ones, they'll live in our hearts forever.

Display Photos of Your Loved One

Having photos of grandma is a way to bring her into daily conversations and lets children know that once someone dies, he or she is not forgotten. If there are no photos of a pet that has died, have the child draw one. The quality of the drawing does not matter. Frame it and display it.

Celebrate the Anniversary of the Death

For the loss of a beloved dog, one family had cupcakes on the anniversary of the death until enough time had passed for the children to adjust.

Plant a Rosebush or Other Flowering Plant in the Person's Honor

A flowering plant, which blooms, dies, and then blooms again, helps children understand the continuing circle of life. A plant also becomes a lasting tribute to a loved one.

Conclusion

Not all of these suggestions will be right for everyone. As each family is different, so are our methods of helping our children with new experiences. Use the suggestions that best fit your family, so that you are better able to help your child learn to deal with the loss of a loved one.

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