

Children's Grief: What Does it Look Like? How Can You Help?

Created by Mari Pitcher, Duke Community Bereavement Services

I. What a Grieving Child Might Feel & Do

FEELINGS

- Sadness, sorrow, depression
- Fear, insecurity, anxiety
- Relief
- Ambivalence
- Longing, loneliness, alienation
- Jealousy
- Guilt, regret
- Apathy, lack of enjoyment
- Powerlessness, helplessness
- Shame (at being different)
- Anger, irritation, frustration
- Feelings of unreality

PHYSICAL REACTIONS

- Headaches
- Rapid heart beat
- Dizziness, faintness
- Stomach pains, upset
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Throat tightness
- Tight chest

ACTIONS

- Play
- Sigh
- Cling (they are going back to a safe time)
- Regress (thumb sucking, bed wetting)
- Dream about the deceased
- Assume adult responsibilities/roles
- Hide emotions
- Risky behavior
- Act-out (get into fights, argue, etc)
- School performance
- Sleep/fatigue
- Withdrawal or restlessness

II. Ways to Help A Grieving Child

1. Help the Child Feel Safe Again

- Present a calm front by dealing with your own anxieties first
- If it is hard for you to talk to your child, seek out friends, family members, or counselors to talk with the child
- Actively manage the level of change in the child's life
- Increase the level of predictability in the child's life (set routines, structure, discipline)
- Be present (truly listen without correcting or judging)
- Increase the child's sense of power and control (let them help make decisions)

2. Help the child understand death

- Provide accurate, concrete information (words like "asleep," "passed away," "on a long trip," can be confusing to the child)
- Answer the same question over and over
- Let the child talk about the loss
- Don't try to distract the child from his grief (new toys, lots of activity, special events)
- Let the child know that the death is not their fault

3. Help the Child Actively Mourn

- Act as an "emotional" coach" (lead by your example, let them cry, punch pillows, etc.)
- Grieve through play (puppets, drawing, poetry)
- Storytelling, reading
- Face cookies (decorate cookies with faces showing emotions)
- Time alone if they want it
- Safe anger release (punching bags, stomp rockets, silent screaming, foot stomping)

4. Help the Child Stay Connected to the Deceased

- Discuss spiritual beliefs
- Create meaningful rituals that include the deceased in some special way
- Share memories and stories
- Make scrapbooks, photo albums
- Find ways to remember the deceased on special days

5. Let the child be a child

- Limit additional responsibilities
- Laugh and play

REMEMBER: A child/teen may not look like they are sad or grieving, but if "they are old enough to love, they are old enough to grieve."

What adults can do to help a child

- As soon as possible after the death, set aside time to gently, yet truthfully, tell the child about it. Choosing a familiar room or outdoor setting to talk may help the child feel more comfortable.
- Be truthful. Do not make up stories that will have to be changed later. If no one will answer a child's questions, he or she may imagine worse details about the death. The truth is usually best shared with the child, according to their level of understanding.
- Do not burden the child with information they are not able to understand. Children need a logical explanation of why a person died, but they may not want all the details for days or weeks afterwards. Be sensitive to what information the child is asking for.
- Encourage the child to express feelings. Share your own feelings. Don't be afraid to cry in their presence. Cry together, hold each other.
- Take the child to the funeral. Let them observe others mourning. Older children may feel useful by consoling others, helping serve food, and being included in decisions about the funeral.
- If the loved one is to be buried, it will be helpful for the child to be present so they will know where the body is buried and where they can return to visit.
- In the weeks and months following the death, talk about the deceased. Casually mention things that person said or did, recall funny stories, happy and unhappy incidents together. Encourage the child to share their memories, too.
- Let the child know you are available to answer any questions. Show that you believe anger, sorrow, loneliness and fear are all normal feelings, and that you will be glad to talk about any concerns they might have.
- Don't force the child to express feelings. For example, children may feel guilty if they feel pressured to cry, yet no tears come. It may take days or weeks before a person cries. Children grieve differently than adults.
- Most of all, just be yourself. Accept and talk about what you are feeling, and your children will be encouraged by your example to do the same. Through sharing grief your families' closeness may deepen, and children can learn skills that will help them cope with inevitable future losses.