

The Death of a Loved One

Death, especially the death of a loved one, is a topic most people prefer to avoid. It creates sad, scary, and sometimes angry feelings. Children experience these same feelings and it is important they receive support and guidance through the grief process. As an individual who works with children, a lot of knowledge and understanding can be gained when working with children who have lost a loved one. It is important to share this knowledge so others can have a better understanding of how to support and care for children who have lost a parent, sibling, grandparent, or friend.



There are many ways you can help a child who is grieving the death of a loved one including:

Be honest. It can be difficult to talk to children about death. We want to protect them from the pain, from the difficult feelings related to losing a loved one. Whether we tell a child the truth directly or not, the child will usually learn the facts one way or another. When we are not honest or ‘talk around’ the death of a loved one, we send a message to the child that it is okay to hide the truth and to not talk about death.

Listen. Many children want to share their story. They may want to tell you about what happened, what it was like for them, and how they feel. Adults, just like children, grieve the loss of a loved one, so it may create difficult feelings for the adult who is listening, but it is important to be there for the child. Some ways to be a good listener include:

- Being a good listener without giving advice
- Reflect back what the child is saying
- Paraphrase what the child tells you
- Ask clarifying questions
- Reflect feelings they express



Explain what death means. It is important to ensure children have an understanding of death. Some children may think their mother will be back when she gets better. A child may think he can fix his father and keep him from dying. When an adult says ‘grandpa is gone’ a child may wonder ‘gone where?’ Being honest and using clear words with the child about death will help the child understand the truth and work through the grief process.

Explain feelings. Children may experience many feelings when they learn a loved one has died including sadness, anger, confusion, and fear. It is important to let the child know it is normal to experience many different feelings. Let the child know you are there to listen to them and help them find safe ways to express how they are feeling such as creating a book about their loved one or writing a letter.

Some other ways you can help a child who is grieving the loss of a loved one include involving the child in the funeral, making sure the child understands what a funeral is, keeping a routine in your home, and most of all offer love and support.

As the child's caregiver it is important for you to tell your child:

- It's okay to cry. Make sure your child knows it is okay to feel sad.
- It's okay to have fun. Your child may feel bad if they have fun. Remind your child that their loved one would want them to have fun and play.
- It's okay to ask for help. Remind your child you are there to listen.
- It's NOT your fault. Some children think it is their fault their loved one died because they were bad or did not give enough hugs. Make sure your child knows he/she is not to blame.
- It's good to remember. Encourage your child, when he/she is ready, to talk about happy memories with a loved one.
- You will be taken care of. Some children wonder who will take care of them. Others may wonder if they are going to die or if another loved one will die also. We cannot predict when someone will die but children can be told most sicknesses and injuries heal on their own or with rest and medication.

Every child grieves differently according to his/her age, personality and past experiences. Some children may begin crying, become clingy, sleep more or sleep less, begin bedwetting, ask a lot of questions or not talk. Other children may become angry, begin taking part in unhealthy behaviors, play 'death' or 'funeral' or display hyperactive behaviors. Whatever your child's response to the death of a loved one it is important for a child's caregiver to be present and available for the child.



Article written by: Jill Morgan, MSW, LSW

Resources Used:

Johnson, J., & Johnson, Dr. M. (1998). Children grieve, too.

The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families. (2004). 35 ways to help a grieving child.

Mundy, M. (1998). Sad isn't bad: When someone you love dies.