

Helping Children Grieve

By Paula Loring, LMSW-ACP, LMFT
Porter Loring Family Care Services

The only thing more painful than our own grief is being in the presence of children who are grieving. Our need to protect them from something they can only partially understand is great, yet we feel helpless when it comes to truly comforting them. It is also hard because children often grieve very differently than adults, and they must experience the grief over and over with each developmental stage of growing up.

It is a special person who can keep an open heart to children who have lost someone close to them. You have to be willing to allow them to be in pain one minute and then be willing to play and laugh with them the next. Grief is like a heavy suitcase to children. They can carry it a little way, but then they must put it down to rest. They grieve in small increments and then distance themselves from the pain through play or other activities. This is a healthy process and one that can go on for years.

Children usually need many adults in their lives with whom they can share their grief. Often their parents are grieving as well and therefore may not be as available to the children as they would like. Friends, grandparents, clergy and teachers can all play supportive roles. Children need someone who is strong enough to listen to their pain, honest and uncomplicated about the death and insightful enough to recognize when they need to focus on their own lives, rather than dwell on the loss.

How children heal from those first few losses, whether it is of a pet, grandparent, friend, parent or sibling, sets the stage for how they will grieve later in life. Much has been written about children and how to help them grieve, but here is a list of “do’s and don’ts” that may be helpful to someone close to a child who is grieving.

Do’s

Do share your feelings. Children learn so much and gain so much self-esteem when they see adults appropriately expressing their feelings and when they are allowed to participate in comforting others and themselves. Encourage tears and respond with comfort.

Do allow time for mourning. Just as with adults, there is a process to grief and there are no timelines. This is especially true when children lose a parent. With each developmental stage children must face that they do not have that parent to guide and support them. This is a heavy burden, and it means so much to have an adult who will accept their need to rework their grief throughout the years.

Do be honest. Answering questions candidly and in straightforward terms relieves children from having to read between the lines or make up magical stories about the death. Even if the truth is hard, it is much harder to discover that you can not trust an adult or to feel that the truth is so bad they must be protected from it. And, don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know”, if you don’t. This response can often lead to very thoughtful

discussions that will help you understand more about what children are thinking and feeling.

Do keep children involved, not just at the time of death but into the future. It is very healing and gratifying to be a part of funeral arrangements, and even more validating and comforting when children know that their wishes and needs will be recognized and respected. Often, children want to help pack up belongings, create scrapbooks and choose mementos to keep. They take great pride in offering comfort to others in pain. And, they can accept decisions that are made about their own future when they have participated in the decision-making that is part of the grieving process.

Do listen at least twice as much as you talk. We all need to tell our story, share our fears and pain, and pour out our longing and love. Children can do this freely if there is a loving ear that does not need to “fix things” or “make it right.”

Don'ts

Don't hide your feelings. Children learn from watching and responding to others. If you hide your feelings they will feel compelled to hide theirs. Repressed feelings in children can lead to acting them out through bad behavior and a sense of isolation, i.e. “There must be something wrong with me. I am the only one who is sad, mad, guilty, relieved, etc.”

Don't fail to recognize behavior problems in children as their way of expressing feelings they don't understand or know how to deal with. When children are fussy, withdrawn or even excessively silly it is often an indication of this. These are good opportunities to spend special time giving lots of encouragement and talking about what they have been thinking and feeling.

Don't tell half-truths or fairy tales. Most of us find it hard to face the finality of death and we worry that children will be damaged by this truth. Actually, children deal better with the truth than information they discover is false, which fosters mistrust of the adults and fear of death. Examples of half-truths or fairy tales are: “Daddy went to sleep last night and now he is in heaven.” Or, “You must be good, because Grandma is in heaven watching you.”

Don't give theological lectures or blame God. “God loved your brother so much he wanted him in heaven.” “It was God's will.” These statements can be very confusing to children who see God in human terms. It may cause them to question God's feelings for them or wonder if they should be bad so God will not want them in heaven.

Don't try to make children feel better by changing the subject or distracting them. It is a very different experience to go to a movie after a good long cry in someone's arms than to be shoved off to the show in order to avoid crying.

If you are a person who is called to minister to children in grief, then you are very special. It means you have courage of heart and strength of conviction that children grieve and must heal just as adults. You will be providing great blessings that will last a lifetime, and you will be blessed by those you serve.