

When Someone Dies: Giving Support

Nora Underwood

To a child, any loss can be traumatic, whether it stems from a divorce, a move or a death. Naturally, nothing is more traumatic than the loss of a close family member. But precisely how a child will experience grief depends on who has died and the stage of the child's development, according to Dr. Wendy Ludman, a Halifax psychologist in private practice. "It also depends on the nature of the death," she adds. "If it's sudden, complete unexpected, violent, or complicated, that will make it much more difficult."

Despite a parent natural inclination to protect a child from hurt and sadness, it's important to let children know when someone who is close is seriously ill and may die. "It helps them begin their early grieving process and separation," explains Ludman. "It also gives the child a sense that they're included and not alone. It can actually lessen the grief when it's shared."

Some children may choose not to share their grief, and that's fine. But they need to be given all the information so they can work through it and come to terms with it. "Children may seem happy or want to go off with their friends, but that can be the way they work through it." One minute they might seem sad and the next they'll want to play with their friends, putting their sorrow out of their minds. Parents should not be alarmed if their child experiences mood swings.

Typically, too, children can seem in better shape than they are because they are trying hard not to upset their parents—particularly if the person who has died is a close family member. Ludman explains that a grieving child may behave perfectly, becoming the model student or going out of his way to please people. Other children may become sullen, withdrawn, indifferent, sad, obnoxious, and develop school problems or become troublemakers. These kids, says Ludman, will ultimately end up getting attention. But the children who aren't misbehaving may need just as much attention and help.

In the end, parents should be on the lookout for red flags whenever a child is faced with traumatic loss, particularly if they are grieving themselves. And if they do have concerns, they should give the child the opportunity to talk with someone. If the loss is a major one, it will take a long time to grieve and it will change the child's life forever. "There's a big misconception that grief lasts a few days or a few months and then you get over it, when in fact you never get over it—you just incorporate the loss," says Ludman. "As an adult you can turn to your friends and talk to them and you'll usually find someone who will have lost their mother or father. Children don't have the same experience on which to draw, so they really do feel very much alone in the world."

Children need to be reassured that they will be looked after by people who love them. In addition, whatever concerns the loss raises about their own mortality will need to be addressed.

They will also need help re-entering their old world, dealing with people who won't know what to say or friends who might feel so uncomfortable that they behave as if nothing has happened at all. But as with adults, if a child is given care and support during grieving, the fog will start to lift and things will improve with time.