



## Supporting Children Who

**Grieve:** A message to parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and friends

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Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for the adults in grieving children's lives is that very often they themselves share in the loss. Many adults report that they are at a loss as to how to cope with death and grief, let alone know how to address the needs of their children.

As you struggle to adjust to life without the person who died, you can expect that grief will impact your whole person; body, mind and spirit. You will also feel a whole range of emotions, though at times, certain ones will dominate. The same will be true for the children. The difference is children, especially young children, often do not understand the complex set of emotions that accompany loss. The children in your life will rely on you for guidance and reassurance. There is no such thing as a 'bad' emotion, how we feel, is how we feel. However, what we do with those emotions is a whole other matter. As the adults in grieving children's lives it will be important for you to first help them identify their emotions, second to validate or affirm whatever they are feeling, and third, teach them how to regulate those emotions.

It is important to remember that every child is unique, with their own set of strengths and challenges, personality, and temperament. Their chronological age may not be an accurate reflection of their developmental age. Parents, grandparents and the other adults in children's lives should learn to trust their own instincts and knowledge of the particular child. Guided by your own ethnic, cultural and religious traditions, you should evaluate the applicability of any advice, including my own. It is hard to predict how any child will react at any given time to the losses in his or her life, however, you can take comfort in the knowledge that the lessons they learn now can have a positively impact on their ability to cope with this and future life stressors.

### **Grief over the course of the lifespan**

From my perspective it is a mistake to assume that grief will eventually end. Instead, I would like to suggest that grief is intermittent and episodic. In young children, you will notice that, like their attention span, their emotions can shift very quickly from one emotion to another. There may be times when you wonder if they are grieving at all! This type of behavior is normal. The challenge for the adult is to discern when to follow and when to lead. Put another way, it is not always clear when

to address the loss with all its accompanying emotions and behaviors and when the child is trying to tell you that their avoidance is a coping mechanism that communicates they are feeling overwhelmed.

Over the course of our lives we will all revisit our loss many times, occasionally even feeling again strong emotions. Whether we are talking about a graduation, a wedding or some other holiday or festive occasion, there will be times throughout our lives that we will revisit the loss. We revisit the loss when faced with life challenge or crisis; wishing the deceased were present because they would have known just what to say. No matter the age, our challenge is the same, to make sense of the loss in light of new situation. As the child ages he or she will have other questions about the loss and will typically need to readdress some of the same questions from each successive developmental level.

Know that children are pretty resilient. There will be times when you misjudge the situation and make a mistake. Just remember that beyond the three basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing, children need two additional things: Children need to know they are safe and that they are loved. If you are able to provide these fundamental needs, the minor errors in judgment that you make along the way will not cause permanent harm.

### **Behaviors you may notice in young children**

Some behaviors you may want to watch out for include; irritability, changes in eating and sleeping, possibly regressive behavior, such as changes in toileting or acting younger or older than they

typically behave. They may become overly attached, engaging in clingy behaviors or conversely, avoidant and rejecting of efforts to console them. They may become very fearful that someone else they care about will also die. Developmentally 4-7 year olds may not understand the permanence or universality of death. They may not understand why the loved one who died cannot get up and move like the characters on TV or in cartoons. It will be important for you to check out what they understand and to avoid using euphemisms that can confuse the child. For example, suggesting that grandma is sleeping in the casket may make them afraid to go to sleep or afraid that she will not be able to breathe when the casket is closed.

### **Memory projects**

In western cultures some families may conclude that, because mentioning the deceased person's name often triggers painful emotions, it is best to avoid mentioning of the person who died. Alternatively, grief experts encourage adults to find ways of artfully weaving the name of the person who died into conversations with children. Talking about the deceased loved one allow for emotional expression and fosters the bonds between them.

Allowing the child to select and keep a few objects or articles of clothing that belong to the deceased is another way of reinforcing an enduring connection with the deceased. Young children can find comfort in talking about and doing activities that they did with their loved one; like going to their favorite restaurant or playing a game they frequently played with the person who died. Saying things to them like, "Daddy loved playing shoots and ladders with

you, and I do too.” or “Remember how much fun you had baking cookies with grandma? Let’s make some right now.” Statements of this sort will not only help them maintain an emotional bond with the deceased and you, but also communicates that it is “OK” to talk about the person who died and to express our emotions. Memory or legacy projects provide a perfect opportunity for emotional expression and they reinforce happy memories. Decorating a picture frame to put by their bedside, making a pillow out of a loved one’s T-shirt, creating a memory box for pictures and special objects or editing together movies of digital images are just some of the ideas that you can do with children of any age.

We celebrate the birthdays of presidents and other significant national and religious leaders; why not consider continuing to celebrate the deceased’s birthday as a way to acknowledge what a gift that person was in your lives? Birthdays, anniversaries and other holidays reinforce the values that are important to the family and reminds us that all of the bond of love endure even death. Having a family meeting and inviting children to have input on how these occasions will be celebrated reinforces the ties that bind.

Nothing can take the place of someone we love, nor should we try. The best strategy for coping with loss is not to avoid the painful emotions or to look for replacements for those who have died; instead, we should celebrate that the bonds of love endure even death and embrace the whole range of emotions

that accompany the human experience.

### **It takes a village**

None of us can manage on our own. We need the help of others to survive in this world. It will be important to draw upon all of the resources available to support you through this difficult time. An internet search should identify resources in your area like grief support groups for children, families and adults. Reach out to a faith community. Do not forget the unique contributions to happiness and consolation that only a family pet can provide. Inform your primary care physician and pediatrician. Involve the teachers and counselors at the child’s school. Connect with other families in the area who have experienced similar losses. In the summer many communities have grief support resources for children like grief camps for all ages to attend. If you find that resources in your local community are limited be aware that there are a vast amount of resources accessible via the internet as well as videos, books and resources that can be purchased. You may also want to seek out the resources of a Child Life Specialist or a family counselor who understands the unique challenges of grieving children.

Finally, do not underestimate the resources that reside within you. Trust yourself. While the experience of loss can be undermining, a relationship built of love and mutual concern are really what matters the most. It is OK to admit to a child that that you do not always know what to say or what to do. All they have to know is that together you will figure it out.