



HOSPICE of LENAWEE

We Carry Your Heart In Our Heart

CHILDREN'S GRIEF RESOURCE PACKET

This resource has been assembled to assist parents/adults to help their children understand and appropriately deal with their grief.

What do children need when there is a serious illness in the family?

Children need...

Accurate information about the illness,
presented in concrete language
that the child can understand

An understanding of the cause of the disease (if known),
and how the disease is spread – or not spread

Assurance that nothing they did, said,
or wished caused the disease,
or can make it better or worse

An understanding of the patient's prognosis

Permission to ask questions and express feelings

Permission to continue to be a child

Validation of their feelings

Because children often do not have the words to express their feelings, they may act them out in ways that can be distressing to adults. When this occurs it is important that adults...

- Look for the disguised need and feelings behind the action.
- Set limits, while also recognizing the emotional turmoil behind the acting out behaviors.
- Offer the child alternative vehicles to express and release their angry feelings (e.g. throwing a ball, running, screaming into a pillow or scribbling with crayons).

Talking to Children about Death



"By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know - if they have misconceptions, fears, or worries. We can help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talk does not solve all problems but without talk we are even more limited in our ability to help."

Talking to Children about Death DHEW Pub. No (ADM) 79-838)

RATIONALE

Talking openly to your child about death can create a comfortable environment to ask questions. If children are sheltered from learning about death they are subject to fears and traumas that grow out of well intended attempts to help. Children are looking to you for guidance through this difficult time. Each child is unique, thus ways of explaining death will vary. The journey of healing grief will weave itself throughout a child's developmental years.

EXPLAINING DEATH AND WHAT IT MEANS

- Avoid euphemism for death like "lost", "taken away", "passed away", or "gone on a long journey". These euphemisms feed children's fears of being abandoned and they create anxiety and confusion. For instance, in an effort to "soften" death one might say to a child that the loved one has gone to sleep thus making the child afraid to go to bed at night. Children often attach unintended meanings to non-concrete language.
- Avoid overwhelming the child with information. Give the facts of the death and then allow for questions.
- Explain that the body will not do what it use to like walk, talk, move, see or hear.
- Explain that the person can no longer feel any feelings he or she used to feel – such as sad, mad, happy, hurt, hot or cold.
- Explain that the person no longer eats, drinks or goes to the bathroom.



Way to Help Children Cope with Death

- Be direct, simple and honest. Explain truthfully what happened.
- Encourage the child to express how they feel and that crying is a normal response and helpful... especially if they are not tearful and wonder why others are crying. It's also okay if they don't cry.
- Accept the emotions and reactions the child expresses. Don't tell the child how he should or should not feel.
- Offer warmth and your physical presence and affection.
- Share your own feelings with the child. Allow the child to comfort you.
- Be patient. Know that children need to hear "The Story" and may ask the same questions again and again.
- Reassure the child that death is not contagious and that the death of one person does not mean the child or another loved one will soon die.
- Maintain order, stability and security in the child's life.
- Listen to what the child is telling or asking you and respond accordingly to their needs.
- Allow the child to make some decisions about participation in family rituals (i.e. visitation, the funeral, socializing after the funeral). Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.
- Inform the school regarding a loved one's illness or death as there may be a change in the child's performance. Request a school support person/counselor be available to assist as needed.
- Allow the use of a comfort object like a blanket, stuffed animal, favorite music, photos or mementos.
- During the visitation/funeral plan to have a close friend available to assist with needs your child may have.



Remember that children differ greatly in how they understand death, as well as their response to grief. Their understanding is influenced by their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality, characteristics, religious and cultural beliefs, and what is modeled for them by those closest to them.

You can make a difference!

How to Help a Child Following a Death

Age Concepts and Beliefs Difficult Emotions Possible Behaviors How to Help

AGE	CONCEPTS & BELIEFS	DIFFICULT EMOTIONS	POSSIBLE BEHAVIORS	HOW TO HELP
0 - 2 years	No understanding of death Child does not have words for feelings Aware of the absence of loved one Notices changes in routine Notices changes in family emotions	Longing Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one Fears of being abandoned Anxiety	Crying Sickliness Indigestion Thrashing Rocking Throwing Sucking, biting Sleeplessness	Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance Maintain routines Meet immediate physical needs Include the child in the mourning process when possible Be gentle & patient
3 - 5 years	No understanding of permanence of death To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip May wonder what deceased is doing Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities	Fear Sadness Insecurity Confusion Anger Irritable Agitated Worried Guilty	Regressive behaviors Repetitive questions Withdrawn Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings Interested in dead things Acts as if death never happened Intense dreams Physical complaints Crying Fighting	Allow the child to regress Give physical contact Encourage children to play & have fun Allow safe ways to express feeling Give simple & truthful answers to questions Maintain structure and routines Answer repetitive questions Let the child cry Talk (reflective listening) Include child in family rituals & mourning
6 - 9 years	Understands that death is final Interested in the biology of death Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death Death is punishment Forming spiritual concepts Who will care for me if my caregiver dies Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)	Sad Anger Lonely Withdrawn Worried Anxious Irritable Confusion Guilty Fear	Regressive behaviors Specific questioning – looking for details Acts as if the death never happened Hides feelings Withdrawal Nightmares / sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Declining or greatly improved grades Aggressive acting out Protective of surviving loved ones	Allow need to regress Give physical contact Have intentional times together Answer questions truthfully Watch for confusion Allow expression of feelings through verbal & physical outlets Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning Find peer support for the child Work with school to tailor workload
10 - 12 years	Understands the finality of death Denial His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) High death awareness (death may happen again) What if my caregiver dies? Formulating spiritual concepts	Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes Shock - Sad Anger - Confused Lonely - Vulnerable Fear - Worried Guilty Isolated Abandoned Anxious	Regressive behavior & fluctuating moods Hides feelings Acts like death never happened Aggressive acting out Withdrawal Nightmares & sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Changes in grades Talks about physical aspects of illness or death	Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort Expect & accept mood swings Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. Find peer support groups Be available to listen and talk Answer questions truthfully Offer physical contact Give choices about involvement in death & mourning
Teenagers	Understands the finality & universality of death Denial His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) High death awareness (death may happen again) May sense own impending death I need to be in control of feelings If I show my feelings, I will be weak Internal conflict about dependence & desiring independence May utilize spiritual concepts to cope	Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief Shock Sad Anger Confused Lonely Vulnerable Fear Worried Guilty Isolated Abandoned Anxious	Occasional regressive behavior Mood swings Hides feelings Acts like death never happened Acts out role confusion Aggressive acting out Withdrawal Nightmares & sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Changes in grades Impulsive & high risk behavior Changes in peer groups Fighting, screaming, arguing Changes in eating patterns	Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort Expect & accept mood swings Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. Support relationships with understanding adults Be available to listen and talk Answer questions truthfully Share your grief Watch for high risk behavior Find peer support groups Offer physical contact Allow choices about involvement in death & mourning

© 2004 Mary M. Lyles, MSW, LCSW

www.childgrief.org

Children's Grief Education Association

Professional intervention may be helpful when any of the above are observed in children or teens, Consider the intensity and duration of behaviors demonstrated.

Teens

“A previous death can create great anxiety for an adolescent preparing to begin emotionally separating from family.”

Considerations to Help a Grieving Teen

- Increase structure in the environment because it is familiar and can be comforting.
- Provide opportunities to talk with non-family members about the emotional impact of the loss. These opportunities can incorporate others (peers) who have had similar losses.
- Teach how to respond to people who ignore the grief or may make comments (e.g. “You need to just get over it” ... or “Get on with your life” ... or “It isn’t good to continue grieving”).
- Be alert for signs of depression.
- Be alert for signs of isolation. Offer opportunities for fun and/or exercise.
- Identify clear, predictable and consistent roles and responsibilities for school and home. This can help maintain boundaries in which the teen can journey through the grief process safely.
- Help or encourage the teen to keep a journal, write a letter, create a collage, comprise a poem, make a memory scrapbook, compose a song... anything creative.



Each Teen’s Grieving Experience is Unique

Grieving is a different experience for each person. Teen’s, as do adults, grieve for different lengths of time, grieve at different levels of intensity, and experience a range of different emotions.

Sadness and crying may be a common expression of grief for one teen, whereas another may respond with humor and laughter and yet another act out with inappropriate behaviors. Adults can best assist grieving teenagers by accompanying them on their journey in the role of listener and learner, and by allow the teen to function as a teacher (<http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources>).

Recognizing and providing constructive ways for teenagers to express their grief will help prevent prolonged or unresolved grief and depression. There are some reactions to grief that most teens feel; these are considered normal or typical grief reactions. Most teens will sense some of the following:

- *Feelings of heaviness in the chest or tightness in the throat*
- *An empty feeling in the stomach and a loss of appetite*
- *Feelings of guilt over something said or done, or left undone or unsaid.*
- *Anger and/or lashing out at others that can happen at any time for no real reason*
- *Intense anger at the deceased for dying and later feelings of guilt for being angry*
- *Mood changes over the slightest things*
- *Unexpected outbursts of crying*
- *Feelings of restlessness, and when something is found to do, finding it hard to concentrate on the task*
- *A feeling that the loss isn't real and didn't happen at all*
- *Sensing the deceased's presence; expecting the deceased to walk through the door at the usual time; hearing his or her voice, or even feeling that they see the deceased out of the corner of their eye.*
- *Talking to pictures*
- *Having a conversation with the deceased in a special place*
- *Sleeplessness, or troubling dreams*
- *Assuming mannerisms, traits or wearing clothes that were favorites of the deceased*
- *Emotional regression and even bed-wetting, which can be very upsetting for teenagers*
- *A need to remember and tell things about their loved one, to a point of repetition that becomes burdensome to others*
- *A need to say nothing at all*
- *A need to become overly responsible*
- *A need to become the "new" man or woman of the household, distracting themselves from their own feelings by taking care of everyone else*

It is important to remember that grief is ongoing. It never ends. It does, however, change in its character and intensity.