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Helping Children Cope

Children should be informed as soon as possible about the death. If the children are not present at the time of death someone close to them should deliver the news at home or in familiar surroundings. Holding and physical closeness may be better than too many words.

Young children are very literal. Avoid phrases such as “gone to sleep” as they may then fear they will die if they go to sleep; or “lost” as they may think the person can be found; or “good people go to heaven” as they may fear they will die if they are good.

Before answering children’s questions, listen to them and watch them. It is important to know what they know about death, how they feel and what they believe.

Allow children to feel and express whatever they feel no matter how uncomfortable it may be for others.

Children’s grief comes and goes. They cannot sustain grief for long periods at a time. They may be sad one minute and involved in play the next.

Maintaining routines, rules and stability as much as possible will offer your child a sense of security.

Do not be afraid to let a child see your tears. Let them know that it is natural to cry when you are sad.

Sometimes it may be necessary to repeat things in words that the child understands.

Children may ask the same questions over and over even though you have already answered them. Be patient with them as this is a normal behavior.

Expect grieving to resurface at each new developmental stage.

Offer activities that may help your children express feelings and cope with the death. You could consider storytelling, art work, music, journaling and physical activity.

Grieving

Following the death of a loved one you may experience intense and overwhelming feelings. These feelings might include shock, sadness, despair, emptiness, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt or powerlessness. You may even experience physical pain. People are usually so unfamiliar with the intensity of such feelings that they begin to think there is something wrong with them or that they are "losing it." It is important to understand that these feelings and emotions are a normal part of the grieving process; they are also necessary for the grieving process to begin.

Each person's grief is unique. No one can tell you how to feel, when to feel or for how long to feel the pain of loss. It is important that you not deny your feelings but instead learn to express them. Sharing your feelings with a close friend, in a journal, through a support group or with a professional counselor can be very helpful.

Since grief is such a difficult process, it is important to take good care of yourself. Eating well, sleeping well and getting adequate exercise are essential. Over time, you may start to notice some behaviors or feelings that come with healing. Some of these may be:

I can handle the tasks at home that I was managing before the loss such as cooking, cleaning, mowing the lawn, etc.

I can enjoy being with the people I care about without feeling they expect too much from me.

I take an interest in current happenings around me.

I participate in activities outside my home such as church, clubs, sports or work.

I take care of myself, whether I want to or not.

Child's Understanding of Death and Response to Loss

Generally

A Time for Healing

Healing is a process that takes time and is hard work. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. These suggestions may help you find ways to cope with your feelings and begin to heal.

Spending Time With Others

Don't feel you need to deal with this alone. Balance private time and time with others. Find a family member, friend or clergy member who you can talk with and share your feelings or just sit with quietly. Grieving with someone can often be healing.

Asking For What You Need

People want to help during a time of loss, but they need you to tell them what you may need and what you don't need. Whether it is sharing memories or doing an errand, let people know specifically what they can do to help. You may need to avoid those people who are not supportive.

Facing Your Feelings

Whatever your feelings are, accept them. They are yours and it is okay to have them. There is no weakness in expressing your feelings. You may feel sadness, anger, guilt or even disbelief. It is important to allow yourself to express all of the feelings that go with your grief.

Dealing With The Stress

Taking care of yourself physically is just as important as caring for yourself emotionally. Be sure to get plenty of rest, eat healthfully and exercise. It is not uncommon for people to become ill or have sleeping difficulties or shortness of breath during times of loss. Quiet activities such as listening to music or writing in a journal can be very relaxing and very healing for some people. Caution should be used with alcohol and prescription drugs. Their numbing effects may ease the grief temporarily, but they do nothing to help you deal with grief over time.

Finding Joy Again

You might feel as though you may never enjoy life again, but try. It is okay to have some fun – have dinner with a friend, go to the park with your dog, see a movie or bake a cake. You don't need to feel guilty about finding pleasure again in your life. Begin looking ahead.

Setting Realistic Goals

All people grieve in their own ways and in their own time frames. Don't let others' expectations affect how you grieve. Set goals for yourself that are achievable and realistic so that you don't become overwhelmed.

WHEN TO CONSIDER SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

There is no timetable for grieving and strong emotions are a normal part of the process. While the support of family and friends is invaluable, some people who are grieving benefit from talking to an experienced grief counselor. People who make the decision to seek professional counseling often do so based on the length and/or intensity of their grief. Other people make the decision because they find it difficult to function in their day-to-day life. Calling a counselor or therapist is not a sign of weakness, but rather of strength. If you feel any of the following, you may want to consider seeking professional help.

- feeling extremely angry about the death
- having no desire to interact with other people
- feeling hopeless about the future
- having thoughts of wanting to harm yourself in order to join your deceased child
- disinterest in or inability to care for yourself and or your surviving children
- using alcohol or drugs to escape from your grief

To find a counselor or therapist in your area, contact your insurance company, your hospital social worker or your local mental health center.

Where do we go from here?

Planning the Funeral

As a parent, you have always tried to make careful decisions about your child's care. While planning your child's funeral you will again be making caring decisions. We hope this information will help you make thoughtful and loving choices for your child. The suggestions included here are just that, suggestions. You may have other ideas or wishes about how to handle the final arrangements for your child. You may find it helpful to contact a clergyman of your faith to clarify any religious traditions or practices you may want to include in the funeral arrangements for your child. Clergy are often very experienced in planning and participating in funerals and may be able to support or guide you through this process. Hospital social workers, chaplains and Child Life specialists also are available to provide information, support and guidance.

Making Arrangements

Following the death of your child you will need to contact a funeral home. The funeral director will discuss the full range of services they have to offer. Things to consider are:

You may want to have a viewing or a visitation. Some families choose to have a viewing open to the public, others want only a private viewing for family and close friends, while others choose to have a closed casket.

To have a viewing or not is a personal choice. Some families feel that it allows them to pay their final respects and to help them overcome any lingering feelings of denial. For surviving children a viewing may help them to better understand the concept of death.

Families may choose not to have a viewing because their religion prohibits it, because they do not want their last memory of their child to be as he or she looked in death or for a variety of other reasons.

Burial and cremation are two types of final arrangements. Decisions about cremation or burial may be based on personal preferences, family traditions or religious practices. Some families choose burial so that they have a place to go to visit their child and so their child may be laid to rest near other relatives in a family plot. Other families choose cremation and make a variety of different choices about what to do with their child's ashes.

There is no right or wrong decision to make about viewings, burials or cremations. It is important to make the decisions that feel most comfortable for you and your family.

Choosing a Funeral Home

In choosing a funeral home you may wish to:

Ask a hospital social worker or chaplain, family, friends or clergy to suggest a funeral home that may best meet your family's needs or preferences.

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Please remember that all of the information here is only meant to provide guidance and ideas. Many of the suggestions have come from other families who have had to plan funeral services for their children. Your child's funeral is a personal event so you may have your own special ideas or things you want to include in the funeral service to make it uniquely yours. The important things to include are the things that will bring you comfort, will allow others to support you and will provide you with a meaningful way to say good-bye to your child.

Should Children Attend the Funeral?

If a child is old enough to have some understanding, you should consider allowing him or her to go to the funeral.

Resources

FLORIDA GRIEF SUPPORT SERVICES

Angel of Hope of Central Florida provides grief support after the death of a child at any age. (407) 260-9222, www.AngelofHopeCFL.org

Begin Again Children's Grief Center in Daytona, Fla., provides support to grieving children who have experienced the loss of a loved one. (386) 258-5100, <http://www.hovf.org/childrens-grief-center>

Bereaved Survivors of Homicide in Orlando, Fla., is a professionally facilitated support group for the friends and family members who have had a loved one taken by murder. (407) 254-7248, www.bshofcentralflorida.org

Children's Bereavement Center in Miami, Fla., provides peer support groups for children, teens and young adults who are grieving the death of a loved one. (305) 668-4902, <http://www.childbereavement.org>

Dustin Project in Longwood, Fla., is a spiritually-based grief counseling program designed to assist students in the bereavement process following the death of someone they love or know. (407) 701-9207, www.dustinproject.org

GriefShare is a national organization that serves grieving children and adults throughout Florida. (800) 395-5755, www.griefshare.org for local chapter information in your state.

Growth from Grief in Orlando and Kissimmee, Fla., serves grieving children who have experienced a loss of a parent or sib

Resources

Resources

CRISIS HOTLINE NUMBERS National – (800) 273-8255 You will be routed to your local crisis center.

BOOKS FOR GRIEVING FAMILIES

Corr, Charles – *Helping Children Cope with Death and Bereavement*
Doka, Kenneth – *Children Mourning, Mourning Children*
Fitzgerald, Helen – *The Grieving Child*
Grollman, Earl – *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*
Krauss, Pesach – *Why Me? Coping with Grief, Loss and Change*
Kushner, Harold – *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*
McCracken, Anne and Mary Semel – *A Broken Heart Still Beats: After Your Child Dies*
Mitchell, Ellen and others – *Beyond Tears: Living After Losing a Child*
Rosof, Barbara – *The Worst Loss*
Sarnoff Schiff, Harriet – *The Bereaved Parent*
Schaefer, Dan and Christine Lyons – *How Do We Tell The Children?*
Schwiebert, Pat and Chuck DeKlyen – *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*
Volkan, Vamik D. and Elizabeth Zintl – *Life After Loss: The Lessons of Grief*

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Brown, Krasny – *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*
Hanson, Warren – *The Next Place*
Goldstein, Ray and Jody – *Where's Jess? A book for siblings*
Johnson, Joy and Marv – *Tell Me, Papa*
Karst, Patrice – *The Invisible String*
Old, Wendie – *Stacy Had a Little Sister*
Mellonie, Bryan – *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way To Explain Death To Children*
Rudowsky, Colby – *What About Me?*
Sabin, Ellen – *The Healing Book*
Traisman, Enid – *Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins*
Thomas, Pat – *I Miss You: A First Look At Death*
White, E.B. – *Charlotte's Web*
Williams, Margery – *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Centering Corporation: A grief resource center where many of these books can be purchased. www.centering.org