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Helping Children After Loss

Be a good listener

Grieving people need to talk about their loss, acknowledge that they have been through a difficult experience. You can't fix their grief but you can be there, hear their story, and share their journey.

Be a shoulder to cry on

Allow them to cry with you, crying helps the release of emotions and this helps with healing.

Be in touch with them

Drop in, call on the telephone and say "I was thinking of you today" write a letter, send an email, remember special days like Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries.

When someone has experienced a loss, there will be big and small adjustments to be made in their lives. These could bring uncertainty, frustration, fear, sadness and change as each new day comes along. Grief is about adapting to change in life, thoughts, hopes, beliefs and the future.

Be a friend

Often being there is all that is needed to support someone who is grieving.

(Adapted from the writings of Doris Zagdanski)





Helping children after a loss

A death in the family

We may be numb with shock, overwhelmed with sadness, physically overcome by our grief. And then there are the children...

Children sense the emotion around them, react to body language and overhear conversations. We want to protect children but it is not helpful to exclude or isolate them by not talking about the death. Children's fantasies can be much worse than reality....

Though children may seem to be uncaring, they are sometimes very sad. Sometimes there are physical reactions such as reverting to thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, and clinging to parents; headaches, stomach aches, rashes and changes in appetite and sleep patterns.

"Telling the children" is not easy. But it is helpful to talk about the person who has died and to talk about what the children are feeling.

The child's response is different from an adult's...

Though children have the same sorts of feelings as adults, they show them differently.

Children often express their feelings through their behaviour, play and even drawings. Adults should not be alarmed if children play at dying or death. They may talk to their toys about their sadness. This is a way for them to make meaning out of what has happened.

When grief is acted out in bad behaviour, giving firm non-punitive disciplinary guidelines can support the child through the chaos of emotion.

Children absorb concepts about grief very slowly and a little at a time. It is normal for a child to be sad for a little while, then go outside and happily play. They may ask questions over and over, even for weeks and months, or they may hide their feelings to protect loved adults from more pain.

A bereavement can bring up the basic fear of abandonment. Reassure the child that you will be there.

Talking about death eases a child's fears. Otherwise the child learns that death is a taboo, mysterious and fearful subject.

Adapted from Hughes, M. (1995)
Bereavement and Support.
Taylor Francis: Washington D.C.

Talking to the child about death...

- Give clear, simple, truthful information in words the child can understand. Say "dead", "died". Not "gone", "lost", "sleeping".
- Be prepared to repeat information many times.
- Don't give long explanations. Give the facts. Wait for questions and answer them. Don't make up answers.
- Find out what the child is thinking. Ask what the child has heard.
- Talk about your feelings. Make sure the child knows your sad feelings are not his/her fault.
- Reassure the child he/she will be looked after.
- Talk about the person who has died. Talk about the good and the bad memories.
- Talk about the death and what will happen at the funeral.
- Let the child attend the funeral if she/ he wants to.
- Make sure the child knows death is not a punishment and is not contagious.
- A hug is always nice!

Helping the child through grief...

- Get back a regular household routine as soon as possible.
- Let the child know he/she is safe and protected.
- Try to understand the child's behaviour. Sometimes he/she does not have the words to express grief.
- Involve the child in a ceremony to say goodbye.
- Talk about bad dreams.
- Let the child help you in an age appropriate way.
- Look together at photos of the person who has died.
- Give the child a memento of the person who has died.
- Let the school know about the death.
- Don't lean on the child for comfort and support..
- Let the child stay a child.

These suggestions also apply to grief experienced after divorce, death of a pet, moving house / school, losses after bushfires, storms etc.

