



Children and Grief

Information for Parents and Caregivers

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“When someone loved dies, children grieve. The most important factor in how children react to the death is the response of the adults in their lives. Caring adults – whether they are parents, relatives, or friends – can help children during this tragic time. Handled with warmth and understanding, a child’s early experiences with death can be opportunities to learn about life and living as well as death and dying. “

Alan Wolfelt

Helping Children Express Their Grief

There are a number of strategies for helping children to express their grief and related feelings. However, in reviewing these don't lose sight of the most important component of all: YOU.

You are a person who cares, who reaches out to acknowledge their pain and wants to help. Your mistakes will be forgiven, your lack of knowledge forgotten when you are truly present for children in times of loss.

1. Self-Awareness:

- Be aware of your own feelings and reactions to loss or death in general, and children and death in particular.
- Children learn to grieve from the attitudes, expressions and behaviours of the significant adults in their lives.

2. Invite/Acknowledge/Listen/Give Permission:

- Communicate your support, caring, availability in both verbal and non-verbal ways.
- Give permission to grieve through sharing information, acknowledging reactions and feelings, providing various opportunities for expression.
- Match their mode of expression in order to communicate.
- Acknowledge and allow their pain; don't over-protect or try to hurry them through it. Be gentle and reassuring.
- Your behavior, attitude and comfort level is more important than anything you can say. Often, sitting quietly and listening is sufficient support.

3. Provide Information:

- Give simple, honest and age-appropriate explanations about loss or death.
- Fantasy is often more frightening than fact.
- Use concrete, accurate terminology; avoid euphemisms (passed away, gone, in a better place, with God, etc)
- Reassure children about normal grieving and individual responses.
- Repeat information and give it over several sessions.

4. Assess:

- What they already know about loss or death in general and this one in particular.
- Their understanding of your information and of words used by other adults.
- Their fears and feelings (don't make assumptions).
- What they really mean by their comments and questions.
- What would be helpful.
- Any changes in behaviour.

5. Maintain structure and routine

- Provide firm, caring structure that allows some flexibility, as required by the individual child's grieving process (space and time to withdraw, to cry, etc.)
- As much as possible, strive for consistent rules and order.

6. Offer opportunities to create rituals and remember the loss

- Provide opportunities to say good-bye and let go in a concrete way, while still keeping the memory alive; rituals make the loss or death seem real.

"The greatest gift you can give your children is not protection from change, loss, pain or stress, but the confidence and tools to cope and grow with all that life has to offer them. "

Wendy Harpham

How to Help a Grieving Child

The death of a family member or close friend can present some of the most difficult challenges a family can face. Loss is painful, and as parents we strive to protect our children from such painful experiences. But when someone important in a child's life has died, children need the support and assistance of adults.

They deserve the assistance of supportive adults to help them manage their feelings. The following suggestions are offered to assist you in the task of helping your child to mourn in a healthy way and continue life with hope and confidence.

What You Can Do:

- Tell the child about the death as soon as possible, using clear, age-appropriate language. Provide factual information about the cause of death without going into unnecessary detail.
- Explain that death means the body no longer works, and the person who died cannot come back.
- Reassure the child that his/her feelings, thoughts or behavior did not cause the death.
- Expect and accept that your child may react in a way that is uncomfortable for you. Anger, curiosity, an apparent lack of feeling, and even laughter are not uncommon reactions upon hearing about a death and are simply the child's attempt to cope with this information.
- Invite questions and be prepared to repeat information you have given. It takes time for children to absorb the reality of death. Be patient and repeat information even if the same questions have been answered many times before.
- Explain the plans for the visitation and/or funeral and encourage the child to participate in some way. When children are given information about what to expect and are accompanied by a supportive adult, they can benefit from inclusion in the funeral ritual.

- Model appropriate grief behavior for children by labeling your feelings and showing your emotions within reasonable limits.
- Anticipate that your child may need extra attention and reassurance for a time. Nighttime fears, separation anxiety, temper outbursts, and regression to younger behavior all are common reactions. Reassure your child that you are still a family, you will get through this together, and there will always be someone to love and care for him or her.
- Maintain routines as much as possible at home and school. Children are reassured by predictable and familiar routines such as bedtime, chores, homework, etc.
- Maintain appropriate limits and expectations regarding behavior. Grieving children are likely to act out their angry feelings in negative ways, but they need to know that the adults in their life will continue to help them control their behavior and find more appropriate ways to express their feelings.
- Inform the child's teacher and/or day care provider of the death and its impact on your child. Maintain communication with them so that you can work together to help your child adjust to the loss.
- Allow and encourage your child to express feelings through play, art, writing, or other expressive means. Such activities can help the child manage overwhelming feelings.
- Nurture memories by talking about the person who died, keeping a photo album or memory book, and acknowledging special occasions. Children need to maintain a connection to the people who were important in their life.
- Find ways to commemorate the deceased person's life with your child. Meaning can be found in such diverse activities as planting a garden, cooking a special meal, or donating to a charity, teaching the child that life has meaning and is not forgotten.
- Be understanding and comforting to your child for as long as necessary. For children, grief is experienced intermittently over time, with periods of mourning separated by periods of "normal" functioning. A happy, playful child may still be a grieving child who needs your support.

- Expect that your child will re-experience feelings of grief as he or she matures. Special occasions such as holidays, birthdays, seasonal traditions and developmental milestones often trigger renewed grief. Anticipating and acknowledging such reactions helps make them more manageable.

What Not to Do:

- Don't lie to your child about the cause of death. Children generally learn the truth eventually and may be confused and angry about the deception.
- Don't use unclear euphemisms and platitudes when talking about the death. For example, saying that the person who died has been lost, is sleeping, or has gone on a trip may be misunderstood by children who interpret such statements literally. Likewise, statements such as "God needed him" may be more frightening than comforting.
- Don't force your child to participate at the visitation or funeral in ways that are uncomfortable for him or her.
- If you have more than one child, don't expect them to grieve in the same way, or to have the same feelings you have. Grief is a uniquely individual experience that does not follow a predictable pattern.
- Don't expect your child to "tell" you how he or she is feeling; look instead for behavioral signals. Children often do not have a well-developed emotional vocabulary but do show their feelings through their behavior.
- Don't set artificial time lines for when you or your children should be through your grief. The loss of a loved one becomes part of your personal and family history.

Misconceptions about Children and Grief

Misconception

Fact

They don't understand what has happened, they're too young

Even the very young know when those around them are upset. Most understand more than adults think.

Going to the funeral would just upset them.

Not having the option to be included in family rituals could be more upsetting. Seeing adults grieve is good modelling.

I must protect them from loss and pain.

All children experience losses and need help learning ways to deal with them.

They don't feel grief the same as adults.

Everyone grieves in their own way; this is normal and healthy. The child's age affects their understanding of the loss.

When they have grieved once, it should be over.

As they mature, children will 're-grieve' losses in light of new understandings.

I won't say or do the right thing, I must be in control to talk to them.

There are no right answers. Saying something acknowledges their grief, dispels fears and misunderstandings.

They won't want to talk about it.

That's often all they want to talk about. Let that be their choice, not yours.

I might upset them.

They're already upset; that is part of grieving.

They need to keep busy.

Routine activities are important. Not thinking about the loss delays grief.

Getting rid of reminders helps;
encourage only good memories.

This tells them it's wrong to think of the
dead person or to have bad memories.

I won't mention it unless they do.

This suggests it is not ok to mention the
person; that there is something bad
about them or their death. They may
feel hurt & sense your discomfort.

Once they've expressed anger or
guilt that should be the end of it.

Phases are circular and each implication
of the loss must be grieved.

It is morbid to want to touch or talk
about the body.

It is healthy and concrete, and a helpful
way to say good-bye and make the
death seem real.

Use terms like 'passed away', 'gone
to heaven'.

These confuse and frighten children:
'dead' is better.

If they are not expressing grief,
children aren't grieving.

They may not know how to express
feelings or think they have permission to
grieve. They may delay grief to avoid
upsetting others.

I should tell them all the facts
immediately.

They may not understand all aspects of
the death or be able to handle the
intensity, or all the details.



Compassionate end-of-life and grief support for Yukoners

Hospice Yukon offers grief support for individuals and families, including children and teens. Our services include counselling (in person, by telephone, or online), Healing Touch, a variety of grief groups, educational workshops, and a lending library. Please contact us for information about current offerings.

Hospice Yukon is open

Monday to Friday

11:30am - 3:00pm

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