

Helping Your Child Cope with Loss

By Larry Deavers

Even as adults, it is difficult to adjust to the loss of someone close to us. For children, who typically do not have adult coping skills, the death of someone close can be especially challenging. So what can you do to help a young person through such a difficult time?

HELPING A CHILD COPE:

- Help your child understand that normal grief involves a range of emotions, including anger, guilt, and frustration. Explain that his or her emotions and reactions may be very different from those of adults.
- Reassure your child that it is normal for the pain of grief to come and go over time. And explain that they can't always predict when they will feel sad.
- If your child is older, encourage him or her to talk with an adult outside the family, such as a teacher or a clergy member. You can also consider an age-specific support group.
- Periodically check in with your child, if they are willing, by asking them how they are feeling (1=Less sad or angry, 10=Extremely sad or angry). This will provide an opportunity for them to share more feelings, ask questions, be alone for a while, or just receive a hug.
- Keep routines and caregivers as consistent as possible, and continue setting limits on behavior. Care, consistency, and continuity help children feel safe.
- Encourage spending time with friends and engaging in other age-appropriate activities.
- Encourage your child not to make any important decisions during this time, like dropping out of band, sports or other activities. Staying active and engaged will help distract from their pain; excessively dwelling on the loss may make it more painful.
- Reassure your child that it is never disloyal to the person who died to feel happy and to have fun. "They would want you to be happy."
- Speak with a grief counselor, child psychologist, or other mental health professional if you are concerned about your child's behavior.

SAYING GOOD-BYE:

Children need to be allowed to choose how they say goodbye to a loved one.

- Give preschool-age and older children the choice of attending memorial services. But do not force them to attend if they do not want to.
- Some children may want to attend a memorial service but not a viewing or burial.

- Allow older children and teenagers to help plan memorials, if they want.
- Talk with children about what will happen at a service ahead of time. Consider visiting the church or cemetery.
- Ask a trusted adult to help take care of young children at a service or to go home with a child who decides he or she wants to leave early.
- Allow children and teens to choose their own way of saying goodbye. It may be different from your way.
- Discuss favorite memories of the loved one. Encourage the child to express their own thoughts by drawing a picture or tying a note to a balloon to be released.
- Help your child plant a tree(s) or flowers as a memorial. Or maybe, give special recognition to some keepsake that represents the child's bond with the one they've lost.
- You may want to make a memory book with your child with pictures, stories or other mementoes.

If the lost one is a sibling, a surviving child may feel the need to "fill in" for the deceased child or may worry that their parent would have preferred if he or she had died rather than the other sibling. It is important for parents to recognize the grief of surviving siblings and to support them.

Help your child understand that the person who died lives on in his or her memory. Parents who are terminally ill sometimes leave letters, videos, or photographs to help children remember how much they were loved. Children can also compile pictures and other special items to create their own memory.

For younger children, most of their knowledge of the person who died will come from memories of other family members. Talk about the person often, and remind children of how much the deceased person loved them. Over time, children can understand that they would not be who they are without the influence of the special person who died.

Although the death of a friend or family member is painful, the messages they receive from those around them have a dramatic impact on the way they view and adjust to the loss. Having caring adults who acknowledge the seriousness of the child's feelings, allow them to openly grieve, ask questions, or even be angry, will allow the child the freedom to explore, express, understand and accommodate his or her emotions, and improve their chances of healing in a healthy way.

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