



## **HELPING CHILDREN EXPRESS THEIR GRIEF**

### **A. General Guidelines**

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 these children.

#### **1. Self-Awareness**

Be aware of your own feelings about loss or death in general, and children and death in particular.

Children learn to grieve from the attitudes, expressions and behaviors of the significant adults in their lives.

#### **2. Invite/Acknowledge/Listen/Give Permission**

Communicate your support, caring and availability in both verbal and nonverbal 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 overprotect 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: no euphemisms.

Reassure children about normal grieving and individual responses.

Repeat information and give it over several sessions.

4. **Check out**

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 behavior.

5. **Maintain Structure and Routine**

Provide firm, caring structure that allows some flexibility, as required by the individual child's grieving process, e.g. space and time to withdraw, to cry, etc.

Consistent rules and order.

6. **Offer Opportunities to Create Rituals, Remember the Loss.**

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

B. Misconceptions About Helping Grieving Children.

<b>Misconceptions</b>	<b>Facts</b>
1. I won't say or do the right thing	1. There are no right answers. Saying something acknowledges their grief.
2. They won't want to talk about it.	2. That's often all they do want to talk about. Let that be their choice, not yours.
3. I might upset them	3. They are already upset and being upset is healthy.
4. They need to keep busy.	4. New activities confuse them. Not thinking about it delays their grief.
5. Getting rid of reminders helps.	5. It tells them it's wrong to think of the dead person.
6. I won't mention it unless they do.	6. It suggests it isn't all right to mention the person or that there is something bad about them/their death. They will feel hurt and sense your discomfort.
7. Once they've been angry or guilty that should be the end of it	7. Phases are circular and each implication of the loss must be grieved accordingly.
8. It is morbid to want to touch or talk about the body,	8. It is healthy and concrete and it is a good way to say good-bye and make the death real.

9. It is easier to use terms like "passed away" or "gone to heaven."	9. These confuse and frighten children: "dead" is better.
10. If they are not expressing grief, children aren't grieving.	10. They may not know how to express their grief. They may not have been given permission for that. They may be worried about upsetting others.

## **TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH**

Death should not be a "hush-hush" topic with children. Relying upon euphemistic phrases such as: "She passed away"...."He's gone to sleep"...."Grandma went away on a long trip"... are often more harmful than helpful. Death is a **NATURAL AND NORMAL CONSEQUENCE OF LIVING**. It should not be a taboo subject for thought or discussion.

Virtually every child will experience the death of a friend, a pet or a family member (or know someone who has had such an experience and shared it with them). Children do develop thoughts and ideas about death at an early age. They also learn quickly who they can and cannot talk with about those thoughts and ideas!

**Ages 3-5:** These children do not yet accept death as a permanent process. Death has an ending and they often ask questions such as: "When will Grandma come back?" They fear separation more than death.

**Ages 5-9:** These children are beginning to understand that death is permanent, but it is not yet universal. Death is often personified and given powers to select those who are to die.

**Ages 9-12:** Death, for these children, is permanent, personal and universal. They understand that they, too, will die....SOMEDAY. They are fascinated with the macabre and find details of death events appealing.

**Ages 12+ :** Most adolescents have reached adult levels of understanding about death. Many adolescents have very intense emotions about death and do spend time thinking about death.

Children should be offered opportunities to talk about death whenever possible and appropriate. They should be offered the opportunity to participate if they so desire.

Expressions of sadness and grief should be shared. They can participate in the support of family and friends and should be included in family visits and conversations.

Children's questions about death should be answered as honestly as possible. It is important to try to discover what is behind the question being asked and to respond appropriately. Do not feel obligated to have all the answers! Sometimes, wondering and exploring are more important than answering. Do not ignore questions, however. Some type of response is always needed as children will create answers for questions not heard and explored

## **NORMAL ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT**

- Struggles to free self from parental authority
- Searches for an adult identity
- Experiences new feelings of self-esteem
- Begins to make decisions
- Begins to control own environment
- Gradually learns to withstand frustration
- Gradually learns to postpone gratification
- Becomes more aware of the world outside of self
- Takes on new responsibilities
- Develops ambition
- Sets goals for self
- Accepts new idea; questions old ideas
- Learns critical thinking
- Extends power of creativity
- Experiments with new leisure time activities
- Develops an interest in the opposite sex
- Transfers some dependency to peers and other adults
- Makes new social adjustments
- Begins to formulate set of adult values
- Begins to formulate personal philosophy
- Begins to questions and reformulate relationship with God
- More value code develops to guide adult behavior
- Develops strong instinct to pass of life to new generations
- Grows in altruism; desire to give care and compassion and service to others

## **ABNORMAL ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT**

- Does not have strong ties with parent to break away from or has ties so strong that breaking away causes too much guilt and pain
- Copies the identity of others and looks to others to re-enforce that identity
- Maintain a low level of self-esteem because negative self-re-enforcers do not change
- Remains indecisive because of fear of rejection (or anticipation of rejection)
- Remains a victim of the environment created by the dysfunctional nuclear family
- Learns to live with continual frustration
- Instant gratification remains very high on priority list
- Becomes more entangled in self and tends to blame others for that entanglement
- Takes on unreasonable responsibilities or rejects responsibility
- Develops unrealistic ambitions (usually self-defeating)
- Floats through life or sets unreasonable goals
- Remains loyal to the ideas of the dysfunctional family
- Learns to criticize instead of think
- Completely blocks creativity
- Is afraid to try new things for fear of embarrassment
- Develops an interest in sexual gratification
- Remains dependent
- Finds social adjustment extremely difficult
- Gets adult values from others
- Survival is a personal philosophy
- Usually has little or no use for God
- Moral code of family usually dictates adult behavior
- Life's a bitch and then you die
- Does for others, but always expects something in return