



Helping Children Express Their Grief

A. GENERAL GUIDELINES

There are a number of strategies for helping children 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, by caring and being available in both verbal and non-verbal ways.

Give permission to grieve through sharing information; acknowledging reactions and feelings; and by providing various opportunities for expression.

Match their mode of expression in communicating with them.

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.

Many times just 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

Find out what they already know about loss or death in general and this one in particular.

Learn their understanding of your information and words used by other adults.

Understand their fears and feelings (Don't make assumptions.)

Find out what they really mean by their comments and questions.

Ask what would be helpful.

Watch for 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;

eg: space and time to withdraw, to cry, etc.

Consistent rules and order are also important.

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

Misconceptions

1. I won't say or do the right thing.
2. They won't want to talk about it.
3. I might upset them.
4. They need to keep busy.
5. Getting rid of reminders helps.
6. I won't mention unless they do.
7. Once they've felt angry or guilty, that should be the end of it.
8. It is morbid to want to touch or talk about the body.
9. It is easier to use terms like "passed away" or "gone to heaven."
10. If they are not expressing grief, children aren't grieving.

Facts

1. There are no right answers. Saying something acknowledges their grief.
2. That's often all they do want to talk about. Let that be their choice, not yours.
3. They are already upset and being upset is healthy.
4. New activities confuse them. Not thinking about it delays their grief.
5. It tells them it's wrong to think of the person who has died.
6. It suggests it isn't okay to mention the person or that there is something bad about them/their death. They may feel hurt and sense your discomfort.
7. Phases are circular and each implication of the loss must be grieved accordingly.
8. It is healthy and concrete. It is a good way to say good-bye and make the death real.
9. These confuse and frighten children; "dead" is better.
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.

