

Good Grief for Families



Child and Adolescent Grief: The Basics

When considering the grief process in children it is important to look at the following distinguishing characteristics:

1. Children who have experienced the death of a parent or sibling often feel isolated or different.

- Supporting the positive self-esteem of the child is especially important during grief.
- Giving the opportunity for sharing with other children who have experienced a similar loss is very helpful.
- Validating a child's feelings may help this experience of "different-ness."

2. Children grieve in "spurts," as their sense of safety permits and needs dictate.

3. Children may be physical in their grief.

- They may experience physical fatigue, anxiety or restlessness.
- Shallow breathing and a pounding or rapid heartbeat are often reported.
- Physical symptoms related to the cause of the death may also be reported.

4. Children understand death and grieve according to their particular developmental (cognitive, physical, emotional, and spiritual) phase.

5. Children often revisit the death of their loved one over their lifespan.

- Children may often re-experience the death of their loved one at each new developmental stage.
- Children and their caregivers are often surprised and confused by the intensity of the children's grief when it is revisited after a long period of time.

6. Grief often interrupts and/or stalls the normal age-appropriate developmental tasks.

7. Children are quick to blame themselves for the death of a loved one and "secretly" carry this guilt for long periods of time.

- Children often have an unrealistic sense of personal responsibility for the death. This often helps to protect them from the experience of the "randomness" or "senselessness" of the death.
- When parents are overprotective and perhaps "shield" their child from the truth, the child may "invent" his/her own truth, often making inaccurate assumptions and taking inappropriate responsibility.
- Children often sacrifice their own grief needs to protect the adults and others in the family.

8. Grieving children often experience their world as "out of control," resulting in:

- Fear as the most basic feeling.
- A need for choices
- Assuming qualities/mannerisms of the dead person as a way of keeping the sense of the person alive.

9. Children grieve as part of a family system.

- The outcome of a child's grief process is strongly impacted by the surviving parent's ability to grieve.
- A death within the immediate family affects the way the family functions as a whole.





Children's Understanding of Death at Different Developmental Stages and Possible Responses to the Death of a Loved One

Very Young Children

- May not understand death due to lack of development in time/space concepts
- May believe death is temporary and reversible
- May experience magical thinking, such as: "If I wish something, it could happen."
- May experience fear of abandonment and feelings of rejection
- Often are confused by euphemisms
- Grieve in small increments

To help:

- Respond quickly
- Allow for a range of emotions
- Answer questions honestly and openly
- Touch and comfort the child
- Allow the child to grieve on their own time table

Ages 5-8, Early Elementary Years

- Tend to personify death
- Begin to understand that death is final
- Understand that death is real but think it won't happen to them
- May be preoccupied with "morbid" details
- May experience fears of God and of separation from important people
- May not have the vocabulary to express feelings, may act them out
- Feelings of guilt and magical thinking may continue

To help:

- Give facts using concrete language, avoid secrets
- Provide structure in school and at home
- Answer questions honestly and openly
- Reflect back child's feelings; reassure any concerns of safety
- Allow repetition in discussion
- Follow the child's lead and time table





Ages 9-11, Late Elementary/Early Middle School

- Begins to have a biological and more rational understanding of death
- May experience concern over death of surviving parent
- May experience difficulty talking about feelings concerning death
- Predominate feelings often are guilt and anger
- May develops facades of joking, unconcerned, etc.
- May experience short attention/tolerance spans in dealing with issues surrounding death

To help:

- Talk about the loss openly
- Address concerns of how this disrupts their lives
- Provide structure, predictability
- Be prepared to deal with anger, encourage physical activity
- Expect learning to be interrupted
- Respect the individual's time table

Pre-Adolescent/Adolescent/Middle and High School

- Usually understand death much like adults
- May see self as immune to death; risk taking behaviors
- Are in an independence/dependence transition, thus fear and confusion
- Often look for meaning in death
- Experience strong peer identification which may make peer death especially hard
- Will act out and verbalize feelings
- Often idealize the dead person
- Often experience anger about death and loss of hopes and dreams
- May have strong sense of responsibility to "caregive," masking own feelings

To help:

- Spend time building trust
- Be willing to listen to the story many times
- Encourage open and honest discussion of feelings
- Encourage writing, drawing, and/or keeping a journal
- Address their issues
- Help them connect with a support system
- Respect their time-table
- Expect decreased attention span, possible changes in performance
- Be mindful of anniversaries
- Recognize cumulative grief





Sharing Grief Within the Family

The following are some suggested guidelines for sharing grief within a family:

1. Respect the thoughts and feelings of each family member.

It is important that every member of a family be treated respectfully as they experience painful and difficult thoughts and feelings. Children experience their own individual grief, as do adults. It is important to acknowledge each person's experience and take it seriously. Comments like those below are not helpful:

- "When you are older you will understand."
- "You should/shouldn't feel/think..."
- "I know how you feel."
- "You don't feel that way!"

It is also important to gently encourage the participation of all family members. Children will often defer to adults, allowing the adults to direct all conversation. It is important to listen and respond to each member of a family.

2. It is okay for family members to remain silent.

Children and adolescents, and maybe even adults may choose not to share. If it isn't safe to be quiet, then it may not be safe to speak either.

3. ALL feelings are okay!

It is important to demonstrate that all feelings are okay to experience in order for family members to feel safe enough to "expose" themselves to one another. When an individual must censor or mask certain feelings, all feelings are affected. For example, the inability to express and experience anger makes the expression of joy limited as well.

Adults and children should be assured that it is okay to cry, and to express anger and even relief or happiness. The key to the appropriate expression of all feelings is finding ways that do no harm to self or others.

Since children often attempt to protect their parents and "shield" them from painful feelings, it is important to assure children (sometimes repeatedly) they need not take care of their parents. Parents are encouraged to share with their child how they get the support they need, and healthy ways in which they work through difficult feelings. When parents model healthy expressions of their own anger, hopelessness, and other feelings in grief, children witness a powerful life lesson.

It is equally okay for children and teens to express their difficult emotions without the parent attempting to fix or rescue their child from the feelings. Often parents are uncomfortable with children and adolescents' expressions of difficult feelings such as anger, guilt, hopelessness, or despair. In their discomfort they may respond with comments that minimize the feelings and/or seek to divert the attention of the child rather than offering much needed validation and normalization of the feelings.

Sometimes parents hear comments made by their child as blaming, leading the parent to see themselves as failing in their role as parents. If the parent is in a defensive mode, the parent may be unable to hear the message their child is really trying to convey.

4. When a person is sharing, listen attentively without interrupting, asking questions, or giving advice unless the person asks for input or feedback.

Grief is a natural response to the death of a loved one. It is not necessary to "fix" all feelings related to grief. Sometimes a family member needs to know that others in the family have experienced the same or similar feelings and thoughts. If a family member's thoughts and feelings are unique within the family, their experience should be validated as important and real.

Often family members are tempted to give advice and problem-solve. Unless the person speaking requests this help, it may not be helpful to offer it. It is all right to ask the person what they need from the family. A good way to phrase this is to ask, "Did you need us/me to simply listen, or were you wanting some help with that?" Then, respect the person's answer.



Bo's Place exists to enhance the lives of those who have experienced the death of a loved one.

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