

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DEATH

The Grief of Children

When children experience the death of a loved one they grieve, just as adults do. They may not be able to verbalize their grief. They may repress their feelings or express them through their behavior. They may seem not to be affected. But they are grieving, often very deeply.

As adults we often want to protect children from the pain of grief. Because we have difficulty dealing with death, we wonder how a young child could possibly cope with it. So we exclude children. We leave them to answer their own questions as they struggle to cope with their loss. As a result, many children facing such a significant loss feel bewildered and abandoned.

Ways to Help Children Cope With Death

- * Be direct, simple, and honest. Explain truthfully what happened in terms that children can understand.
- * Encourage the child to express feelings openly. Crying is normal and helpful.
- * Accept the emotions and reactions the child expresses. Don't tell the child how he or she should or should not feel.
- * Offer warmth and your physical presence and affection.
- * Share your feelings with the child. Allow the child to comfort you.
- * Be patient. Know that children need to hear "the story" and to ask the same questions again and again.
- * Reassure the child that death is not contagious; that the death of one person does not mean the child or other loved ones will soon die.
- * Maintain as much order, stability, and security in the child's life as you can.
- * Listen to what the child is telling or asking you. Then respond according to the child's needs.
- * Allow the child to make some decisions about participation in family rituals, i.e., visitation, the funeral, socializing after the funeral. Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.

- * Children's school work or school life may be affected by the death. The teacher and the school counselor should be made aware of the situation. If the serious problems arise on a constant basis, professional help should be sought for the children.

Some Behaviors of Grieving Children

Children may react to death in a variety of ways. Some will exhibit many of the following reactions, some only a few. Some will react immediately; some may have very delayed reactions.

- * Denial -- "My mommy didn't really die." When a child resumes play immediately or laughs inappropriately it does not mean there are not feelings, but that the loss is simply too difficult to bear at this moment.
- * Anger and Hostility -- "How could they die and leave me here all alone like this?" "Why didn't mommy and daddy take better care of my baby brother?" "Why did God let my friend die?" Anger should never be suppressed, but it is important to help children realize what they're really angry about: the death/loss of their loved one.
- * Guilt -- "If I hadn't been such a bad little girl/boy my mommy wouldn't have died." "I was mad at my brother/sister, that's why (s)he died." Children *often* believe that something they said or did may have caused the death.

For example, children may believe that because they did not know CPR, they are responsible for the death. It is very important to be watchful for this kind of guilt and to assure the child that this is not the case. Check to make sure that he or she understands and believes you.

- * Panic -- "Who will take care of me now?" When a death has recently occurred, especially if it is the death of a parent, a common concern among children is whether they will be cared for. Children need to be reassured that, although something upsetting has happened and the adults are perhaps confused and agitated, the children have no need to fear for their future.
- * Clinging or Replacement -- "Don't leave me mommy!" "Uncle Dave, do you love me as much as Daddy did?" Hold them and give them your love and this should pass.
- * Bodily Distress and Anxiety -- "I can't sleep." "I feel sick just like my sister/brother did before (s)he died." Keep your doctor informed about any problems and, with time and caring, this should also pass.
- * Idealization -- "Grandpa was perfect." In their eyes and memory maybe grandpa did seem perfect. This is a common reaction for us all.

- * Assumed Mannerisms -- "Don't I sound just like my Daddy?"

All these reactions are very common and should not cause undue concern unless they continue for several months.

Common Explanations That May Confuse Children

Some of the explanations we use with children can actually make the grief process more difficult or cause problems later in life.

- * Your mother went on a long journey -- "Then why is everyone crying?" "Why didn't she say good-bye?" "I thought vacation trips were supposed to be fun." "Daddy, please don't go away."
- * Your Aunt was sick and had to go to the hospital -- "If I get sick will I go to the hospital and die, too?" "I don't want my sister to go to the hospital for an operation." "The doctor is bad -- he made Aunt Sue die!"
- * It was God's will. God was lonely and wanted your brother. He was so good that God wants him in heaven -- "I'm lonely for my brother. I need him more than God does. God is mean!" "If God wants the good people, I'm going to be as bad as I can. I don't want to die."
- * Your grandfather went to sleep -- "I don't want to go to bed." "I'll make myself stay awake all night so I won't die too."

With your loving and patient concern the child will be better able to work through the grief process and grow, once again, into a full and healthy life.