

Grief Speaks

<http://www.griefspeaks.com/id97.html>

Talking With Young Children about Death: Strategies for School Systems

- Recognize that children are not born with a fear of death. This is something that is passed on to them from adults. Protecting children from death and their feelings about it by not talking about the event may only complicate grieving.
- Talk to the children about the death as soon as possible after it occurs to prevent them from hearing misinformation and rumors from other sources.
- Because classroom teachers are familiar to children, they should lead the discussions whenever possible. Avoid impersonal announcements over the public address system
- Give children honest explanations about what happened. Detailed focus on the specifics of the death is not usually necessary and may frighten younger children. It is important to acknowledge that all information about the event may never be available and we have to be careful about believing everything we hear, since rumors are often created to fill vacuums in data.
- Review with children the many different ways we can react to loss and reinforce that there is no one way or right way to feel. What is important is to recognize our feelings and talk about them.
- Explain that sometimes a current loss can make us remember and re-experience previous losses in our lives. We may find ourselves thinking about a death in our own family, for example, that happened a long time ago, and not understand that these thoughts have been triggered by this current death.
- Understand that children express feelings through their play, art work, or written work. Be sensitive to the messages that may be conveyed in these ways.
- Recognize that children may need what seem like endless explanations about what happened because of their immature ego structure. Their obsessional questions may be a way to deal with the confusion they are experiencing in trying to understand and come to terms with the event.
- Help children to remember the deceased and integrate these memories into their lives.

Helping Parents Help Their Children: Information about Coping with Trauma

1. Why traumas affect us so profoundly is that they shatter our assumptions that the world is a safe and fair place, that there is always some kind of meaning in life events and if we are smart and responsible enough, we can protect ourselves and our children from tragedy.
2. Recovery from trauma means being able to put the experience behind us. For children, this means getting back to the business of being children as soon as possible, and anything adults can do to provide an environment where kids can continue to be kids is helpful in trauma resolution.
3. Children often view traumas in a different way than adults do. They lack the ability to appreciate the longer range implications of an event, especially if it was a community trauma and their own family was not personally touched. Their view of the trauma is often based on how they see the adults who are close to them responding. Younger children may be more alarmed if the adults in their lives seem very upset and emotional. Conversely, children may be less impacted if the adults in their lives are calm, reassuring and supportive.

4. Children's reactions to trauma are as individual and different as one child is from another. Some children may have big reactions to small events while others may seem to react minimally to terrible things. There is no one right way to respond.
5. That children seem to recover from a traumatic event more quickly than adults is often a reflection of their ability to focus on the immediate present rather than on the past or future. Especially if they were not personally touched by the event or witnesses to it, they may be able to put it behind them and move on with their lives in a remarkable short period of time.
6. Another reason children may seem to under-react to a traumatic event is that they can only tolerate intense feelings for a short period of time. So they experience the upsetting feelings for a brief period of time, then back away from them until they can tolerate the intensity again. So what may look like denial or avoidance to us is really an example of effective coping. Parents need to take advantage of opportunities to talk about the trauma when their children present them.
7. External events may reactivate the trauma. TV shows, the news, etc may be reminders or cause distress as it brings up the original trauma. Being prepared for these reminders, whatever their source is the best way to cope with them.
8. Dealing with trauma is not something most of us have much experience with - it's not a "normal" parenting skill. So if you are concerned about your child's reaction or lack thereof, a good way to deal with uncertainty is to check it out with someone whose opinion you trust. Your school counselor is a good resource as is your local mental health agency or clinic.
9. While traumas are by definition upsetting, our response to them is what makes them manageable. When events in life seem out of control, the fact that we can control our reactions to them sends an important message to our children. Remaining in emotional control also helps us develop more effective problem solving strategies to protect ourselves as best we can from similar catastrophes.
10. **Show compassion.** Compassion means opening your heart to another person and being truly present with the griever. Set aside your own worries and needs and be available to him or her. Often this means saying little or nothing at all.

These Are Some Helpful Words That Grievers Have Shared:

I am sorry.

I don't know what to say. There are no words.

I am here for you.

I can listen if you like.

I know I can't fix anything for you but I want you to know I care.

Take all the time you need.

This must be very hard for you.
What's the hardest part?

How are you doing with all of this?

I'll call you tomorrow. (but only if you will)

I don't know why this happened either.

Yes, it isn't fair.

So often as well meaning friends, co-workers and loved ones , we don't know what to say to a person who has just experienced a loss so we say nothing at all. We fear saying the wrong thing. Grievers often feel abandoned by friends in the midst of their loss because of this. Although many of the following statements we may recognize that we have said to people, it is important to understand that these statements are often not helpful. Grief is about a broken heart, yet often we speak to people's intellect as opposed to their heart.

Avoid cliches as well as these common platitudes:

Time heals all wounds. (Time doesn't heal all wounds, although healing takes time).

Try to look for the good in the situation. Be positive.

Your loved one is in a better place. (There is no better place for my loved one than with me).

The Lord never gives us more than we can handle. (That is not how I feel right now).

Try not to cry. He or she wouldn't want you to cry.

I know how you feel. (I think this is the worst thing we can say, because we never really know how someone else feels. Tends to make grievers angry).

Everything will be okay. (Believe this for the person and hold on to hope, but tends to feel like you are dismissing someone's grief).

Let me know if I can do anything for you. (Just show up and do something if you want to.

Grievers often don't call to ask for help. Encourage them to have a list of chores, errands that need to be done so when people ask, they have something concrete to give them. People do enjoy doing for the grievers and it will give them something to do. Men especially prefer to be action oriented in their grief, so try to give the men something tangible to do).

You're still young. (You will meet someone else, have more children,,,))

It was God's will. (Many people already feel angry with God and this won't help at this time).

It all happened for the best. (This can feel shockingly painful).

You can have other children. (Children can never, ever be replaced).

It is time to put this behind you. (This is spoken to many children and teens by adults. There is no time line to grief. We all grieve in our own way and for as long as we need to. Children regrieve at each developmental stage. Grief really never ends, but it changes. The acute pain dissipates in time, yet on holidays, special days, and other times it can feel just as acute as when the loss first occurred. Alan Wolfelt calls this a grief burst or others have said we are sometimes "ambushed by grief."

You have your whole life ahead of you. (Many grievers don't even know if they can or want to go on another hour in this pain, so pointing out they have a whole life to live without their loved one is not helpful at all).

At least he or she is out of pain. (Well I am not).

Be strong. (We are telling people not to cry and to hold in their feelings).

Something good will come of this. (It probably will and even if it doesn't, most people would trade the good that came from it for the person they lost in a moment).

You can always remarry. (People are not replaceable).

There are other fish in the sea. (That was not a fish, but a person and I don't want another one, I want that one).

You can get a new dog, cat, bird.

Don't cry as it will upset your mother/father/sister/brother. (Creates a sense of guilt and a burden of responsibility).

He or she had a good life or a long life. (Maybe they did, maybe not but it wasn't long enough for me).

Now you are the man/woman of the house. (Heavy burden to place on a child or teen. This has caused much pain in many children and teens. Often the extent of these damaging words are not realized till years later. Often teen girls or boys not only deal with the loss of a parent, but also have to take on many more responsibilities around the house which often leads to feelings of resentment on top of their raw grief. They now need to deal with secondary losses and don't need us to tell them they are adults, when they are not).

If you think this is bad, I know a family..... (Please let's not compare, or minimize other's losses).

Let me tell you about my own loss which is similar to yours. (There will be a time for you to share, but not right now. Your role is to listen and stay with the person's loss. When we bring the focus to ourselves, we leave the person in a real way. They want to not feel alone. Grief shared allows the person to feel some relief for a time before they need to gather it all up again and make it into tomorrow).

There is a reason for everything.

Be Strong

She did what she came here to do and it was her time to go.

She was so good, God wanted her with Him.

You can still have another child.

Aren't you over him yet, he has been dead for a while now.

She brought this on yourself (heard that often with my mom who smoked and died of lung cancer).

At least she lived a long life, many people die young.