

Talking With Children In Grief

From Bereavement and Support by Marylou Hughes
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1. Be direct. Use the correct words. Say "dead." Do not use words that soft-pedal what happened. Children are not able to generalize from the words "sleeping," "gone," or "lost." They will believe that the person is lost, sleeping, or gone for a while, all of which imply that the person will come back.
2. Do not go into detail or give long explanations. Give the facts. Wait for questions. Answer the questions. If you do not know the answer, do not guess or make something up. Admit that you do not know. If you can find out the answer from another source, tell the child that, and follow through.
3. Find out what the children are thinking. Ask the children what they have heard and what they think has happened.
4. Talk about your feelings. If you look sad or are crying, explain why. Let children know that the unhappy feelings are in no way related to them, but that you are mourning the death of the loved one.
5. Reassure the children that they will be cared and provided for.
6. Talk about the person who died. Bring up fond memories and other memories too.
7. Talk about the procedures that surround the death, such as the wake, funeral, memorial service, cremation, burial, and visitation. Explain what will happen and give the child an opportunity to participate.
8. Read a children's book about death to the child.
9. Praise children when they are functioning well so they will feel more able and not so out-of-control. However, do not ask them to be grown up and take on adult responsibilities and behaviors.
10. A hug is always nice.
11. Make sure the children know what caused the death and that it is not related to anything they did, is not a punishment, and is not contagious. They will not catch it and neither will you. Assure them that you will be around for a long time.
12. Be prepared to repeat explanations and give the information again and again.

Helping Children Through Grief

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1. Return to the normal household schedule as quickly as possible. Children feel more secure with their regular routine.
2. Let the children know that they are protected and safe. When they feel secure, they will be able to live through their grief.
3. Try to understand the children's behavior. If they do not have the words, they will express their grief through their behavior.
4. Involve the children in a ceremony that gives them an opportunity to say good-bye to their loved one.
5. Talk about bad dreams, or have the children draw a picture of the dream. Have them rip up the picture and throw it away. This gets rid of the dreams.
6. Do not be alarmed if the children play at dying or death. This is a way for them to work through their feelings and fears.
7. It is meaningful for the child to do something to memorialize the loved one.
8. Plan something for the child to look forward to, such as a vacation or other enjoyable experience.
9. Let the children help out in age-appropriate ways.
10. When you are not available, make sure the children know that someone trustworthy is present.
11. Look at pictures of the deceased together.
12. Give the children tangible mementos of the person who died.
13. Let children stay children. Do not lean on them for comfort and support.
14. Let the school know of the death, and let the children know you are doing this. They may not want you to. Do it anyway. It is better for the children to know that the teacher and the other children know about the death, than to suspect they might know.

SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF

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PHYSICAL

Hyperactive or under active
Feelings of unreality
Physical distress such as chest pains,
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Change in appetite
Weight change
Fatigue
Sleeping problems
Restlessness
Crying and sighing
Feelings of emptiness
Tightness in the throat

EMOTIONAL

Numbness
Sadness
Anger
Fear
Relief
Irritability
Guilt
Loneliness
Longing
Anxiety
Meaninglessness
Apathy
Vulnerability
Abandonment

SOCIAL

Overly sensitive
Dependent
Withdrawn
Avoid others
Lack of initiative
Lack of interest

BEHAVIORAL

Forgetfulness
Searching for the deceased
Slowed thinking
Dreams of the deceased
Sense the loved one's presence
Wandering aimlessly
Trying not to talk about loss in order to
help others feel comfortable around them
Needing to retell the story of the loved
one's death