When Your Child is Grieving

Helping Kids Face Loss

Children are our future, and no one doubts it. But what does the future look like when a child's life has been turned upside down by the death—expected or unexpected—of a loved person? Children grieve much differently than the adults in their lives, but they very much do grieve.

What You Might See in a Child Who is Grieving

Grief is more than an emotion—it is a collision of every emotion a human can possibly feel, shaking us "from top to bottom." You may be uncomfortable with some of your child's reactions, but resist the urge to try *fixing* him, because he doesn't need to be fixed—just loved and accepted.

Changes in behavior are sometimes pronounced for children in grief. You might be seeing more defiant attitudes or outbursts than you are used to from this child. While parents and other authorities in a child's life require accountability for behavior, it helps to understand the deep emotion out of which some of these behaviors may be coming.

You might also notice significant changes in a child's academic performance, especially related to the absent-mindedness and "lack of focus" common to people in grief of all ages. Simple tasks sometimes require much more time and one may start and stop the same project multiple times. In bereavement, this is usually less related to procrastination than it is to a child's difficulty concentrating and the proneness toward "day dreaming" that is normal in grief.

Communicating With a Grieving Child

Carrying on a conversation with a child can be a daunting challenge for some of us, even when circumstances are perfect. But when a child is grieving the death of a parent, grandparent, sibling, friend, or even a pet that conversation can prove doubly difficult. Here are some ideas you may find "work:"

Allow children to see your sadness, too; they need the model

- When responding to questions, clarify what the child is asking. Ask something like, "Are you asking where Grandpa's body is now or are you asking what our family believes about what happens to a person after he dies?"
- Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Human development specialist Dr. David Crenshaw writes, "Children can bear the truth, no matter how painful, much more easily than they can handle being deceived." (from *Bereavement: Counseling the Grieving Throughout the Life Cycle*)
- Come to terms with your own attitudes about death. Sometimes, kids are much more at ease with the topic than grown-ups are, so be sure you are honestly facing your own anxieties and concerns.
- Don't try to shelter your children from the pain of this experience. At first glance, it seems

reasonable to "spare them" from knowing much about dying or grief. What children need from you is a healthy model of how to grieve rather than an attempt to "protect" them. Allow them to see your tears and sadness, encouraging them to experience grief.

- Expect to repeat yourself—about a hundred times! As no surprise to parents, this principle reminds us that often kids ask the same questions over and over. Most often, this grows out of a need for information, so plan to patiently explain things many times.
- Prepare children to participate in funeral ceremonies by emphasizing the senses—what you will hear, see, touch, and smell for example. While children should probably not be either forced nor forbidden to participate in the funeral, they must be given clear explanations of what to expect. Clergy can sometimes help with this preparation and our funeral directors can help you find the words to explain funeral ceremonies to your children.

Most children deal in very healthy ways with death and grief issues when they receive support from caring family members, the school, and the faith community. Many hospices have programs for bereaved children and you may find your family's involvement will make the process better for everyone.

Make sure you notify people who are significant in your child's life such as teachers, scout leaders, and coaches. These people will be of great help to your child in the process of bereavement. And, one of them could likely sit with your child during the funeral to provide extra care and support to the "littlest grievers."

Children grieve too. You help them for a lifetime when you help them learn to grow through their grief. Helping a child in grief now is one more way you help her develop a positive future.

This article was written by William G. Hoy. A nationally-known educator and counselor in the field of bereavement, Dr. Hoy oversaw the clinical counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice until his recent appointment to the Medical Humanities faculty at Baylor University.
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