

How to Help Children Cope with Death

Many children will have to face the death of someone that they know before they reach maturity. Whether the death is of a loved one or someone in the school or community, it is important that a child be guided to an understanding of what has happened and what it means to them. It isn't always easy for adults to know how to help.

What should we tell children about death?

Children should be told about the death by someone close to them, and they should be told the truth. A child's view of death is different at different ages. Listen and find out the particular child's viewpoint. The child needs to understand the death has occurred, that it is final and that it is all right to express feelings.

Adults must encourage children to understand the reality of death. Do not tell a child that "Grandpa went away on a trip" or "Mom is living at the hospital." Healthy grieving for both children and adults depends on acknowledgment of tragedy, not denial.

Children know when they are not being told the truth about something that is affecting those around them. If all the facts are not given, children will create or fill them in themselves.

How do children react to death?

Like adults, children react to traumatic situations with disbelief, bodily stress, anger, guilt, anxiety and panic. It is misleading, however, to suggest that all children will follow a predictable pattern. Children often act out their feelings about death in way that seem inappropriate to adults. A child in learning to cope may not be able to say what they feel in words and may depend on body language and behavior to vent feelings.

"Delinquent" behavior may be a way of working out grief and anger at life's perceived injustice. Perceptive adults can try to understand what the behavior is communicating.

Children may have unrealistic notions which prompt questions. Did I cause this to happen? Will I die too? What will happen to me now? Make sure children understand your answers, so that unnecessary fear can be avoided. Childhood bereavement may also be more long-term than an adult's. Children process a death's meaning as they go through the developmental stages. Do not be surprised to see grief return on special occasions such as birthdays and holidays and during significant life events such as graduation. Also, do not be surprised to hear more detailed questions as the child grows and is better able to comprehend the answers.

How can children be encouraged to express their grief?

Give children every opportunity to ask questions, discuss memories of the person who has died and unburden feelings. Don't be afraid of tears or angry reactions and to express your own grief in front of the children. Parents who openly express their own emotions free their children to do the same.

Children should feel safe to express their grief in their own way. A child may express anger at the loved one for "leaving." Or a child may make an honest statement like, "I'm glad it wasn't me." These reactions are normal. Children need to know that it is acceptable have and express such feelings.

Encourage children to reach out to adults other than their parents as well – a grandparent, aunt or uncle, clergy or school counselor. This is especially important if parents are too traumatized themselves to cope with their children's feelings. For children whose grief is deep and sustained,

provide every opportunity to talk about their loss. Then help them get out themselves and into social activities appropriate for their age.

Are there any reactions that can be harmful to a child?

Avoid telling children to “be brave” or “be strong” for the sake of younger children or a parent who is taking the death “badly.” Children who keep grief bottled up inside may later develop more serious problems later. It’s better to be realistic and say “Yes, it’s tough.” Or, “I feel bad too.”

Family religious beliefs can provide needed strength and comfort. However, avoid statements like, “your brother went to sleep and God took him home.” Or “God took Daddy because God wants good people in heaven.” The child may come to fear going to sleep or being “good”. Much better would be a statement like, “Because your brother died, God is taking care of him now.”

Should children attend the funeral?

Children are an integral part of the family and should be included in significant occasions. For children, as well as adults, the ceremony surrounding death is of enormous significance. Children need to be given the choice to attend part or all of the services. If the children will be attending the visitation or wake and funeral, explain in advance some of the details. Tell them what to expect if they may be viewing the body. Put them at ease by describing what will happen during the visitation or service so that they will understand why it is being done. Allow them to not attend.

When are children’s reactions causes for concern?

Reactions such as regression, denial, inability to function and emotional disturbance are normal in childhood grieving for a while following bereavement. However, reaction that persist or become extreme may indicate significant problems. The following reactions may indicate that outside help and counseling is needed:

- The child continues to pretend that absolutely nothing has happened,
- School work takes a dramatic and prolonged decline,
- The child frequently physically assaults others or is cruel to animals,
- The child becomes involved with drugs, alcohol, or sexual activity,
- The child begins committing socially delinquent acts,
- The child panics frequently,
- The child threatens suicide. Suicidal threats should always be taken seriously and help should be sought immediately.

In the end, of course, your own feelings about death will determine how you handle children’s grief. The first challenge for adults, then, is to better understand what it means to you.