

# ***Grief and your Young Child***

Few things in life can be as confusing and frightening to a child as the death of a loved one. During this emotional time, it's vital for parents and family members to reach out to their children and help them express and work through their feelings. Talking to your child sensitively and answering her questions honestly can help build the skills necessary to cope with a loved one's passing.

## **The importance of talking to our kids**

Sooner or later, a child learns that all living things die and that death can happen at any time. Listening to your child as she expresses her emotions and discussing the finite nature of life in honest, understandable terms can help her cope with her loss.

## **Understanding a child's feelings**

Experts recommend that the best time to talk to a child about death is before a loss or tragic event occurs. This may prepare her and answer questions that come up when she actually experiences grief and loss. Children, like adults, mourn when a loss occurs.

Children need to be allowed to mourn in their own way. Many younger kids act out difficult feelings through play and behaviors such as anger, clinginess, irritability or regression (e.g., thumbsucking long after quitting the habit). Provided they don't extend for too long a period, these behaviors are normal coping mechanisms.

Because young children are at the center of their own world, they may blame a death on something they said or did. Children also need to be reassured that the death is in no way their fault. They also may wonder if.

Giving your child sufficient time to mourn and express her difficult feelings is important. However, try to make her feel safe, secure and comfortable by returning to regular family routines as soon as you feel the time is right.

## **Tips for talking about death**

- Be as honest and clear as possible. While you don't want to sound morbid or insensitive about death, don't try to protect your child from the truth. Talk candidly about the circle of life, how death is universal and unbiased, and what causes it.
- Avoid using cliches. Instead of saying Grandpa's "passed away," "gone to sleep," or "gone away," be truthful and simply say, "Grandpa has died." Cliches can further confuse the child: she may be afraid of "going to sleep" or what it means to "go away," for instance.
- Demonstrate how new life comes from death. If you are a religious or spiritual person, you may want to talk about the significance of death. Tell your child that your love for the deceased never dies, and that the happy memories and lessons we learned from the deceased are carried on through us. In this way, you can encourage your child to keep the spirit of the deceased person alive by remembering him or her.
- Relate the lesson to your past experiences. Talk about how you felt at a young age when your pet died or when a relative passed away. Reveal your initial feelings of confusion, fear and anger, and relate how you resolved these feelings over time.
- Be prepared for a variety of questions. Young children especially may be very curious about all the details of death and burial and ask uncomfortable questions such as "Why do they want to put Grandpa in the ground?" Avoid softening the truth or ignoring her questions. If you don't know how to respond to your child,

simply say, "I really don't know how to answer that."

- Prepare your child for the funeral. Help her comprehend what will happen and make her comfortable by talking to her about the service, the rituals involved, and the sadness and crying that she may see from other relatives. Forcing a child to attend a funeral service or view the deceased's body when she's not comfortable is not a good idea. Except for very young children, you do not need to protect your child from reality by insisting that she not attend the funeral. Ask your child what she would like to do, and encourage her not to be afraid to attend the wake and funeral without pushing too hard.

### **The stages of grieving**

Children, like adults, each cope with grief at their own pace. Typically, however, most kids go through the following stages of grieving:

- Shock, denial and isolation. "This can't be happening to me." The anxiety of these feelings can also cause physical symptoms such as bed-wetting, exhaustion, and sleep disturbances.
- Anger. "Why me?" The child may feel abandoned or rejected by the deceased, demonstrate rage, and blame others such as her parents or God.
- Guilt. "It's my fault," or "If only I hadn't done..." It is important for kids to realize that their thoughts, feelings or interactions with the deceased did not bring on death. If your child had a disagreement or behaved poorly prior to the death, it is important that they not carry guilty feelings as a result. Talk through their feelings with them.
- Bargaining. "If you just make it better, God, I promise to..."
- Depression. "It's no use." The child may feel emotions such as deep sadness, helplessness, hopelessness and isolation.
- Acceptance. "I understand what has happened, and I can get through this." The child learns to carry on without the deceased. Remembering holidays and anniversaries can help your child honor her lost friend

Don't be afraid to seek professional help to ease your child's grieving process, especially if her sadness lingers.

### **Warning signs**

Some children have more difficulty than others coping with the loss of a loved one. Experts say that most kids return to a state of normalcy and acceptance by no longer than six months after the death. However, if you observe the following warning signs in your child over a prolonged period of time, seek professional help:

- Lack of interest in daily activities
- Denial: the child pretends that the death hasn't happened
- Fear of isolation
- Poor grades and declining school performance
- Frequent bouts of panic
- Social withdrawal from friends and family
- Inability to sleep
- Imitation of the dead person or desire to be with the deceased

- Lack of interest in eating
- Irritability and uneasiness
- Regression: acting younger than her age
- Bedwetting long after being potty trained

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