

Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss

CHILDREN GRIEVE TOO

Grieving the loss of someone we love is a healthy and universal experience. It helps us accept the change in our lives and begin the healing process. The intense emotions triggered by grief can easily overwhelm children and teens. Because children become skilled at “reading” adult behavior, it’s very important that we help them learn to cope with loss in healthy, positive and productive ways.

If we behave as if “everything is fine,” our children may come to believe that it’s not OK to talk about illness, death and the emotions they are feeling. We may also be teaching them not to trust us. Children who keep these emotions and experiences bottled up are at far greater risk for emotional health and trust issues throughout their lives.



Be aware that young children often act out their emotions because they may not have the words, language skills and/or maturity to express what’s going on. While there are no wrong feelings, there can be inappropriate behaviors. Don’t be afraid to set limits or seek professional counseling – especially if the behaviors are harmful to the child/teen or others.



COMMUNICATE ON YOUR CHILD’S LEVEL

Your child’s age and developmental stage will impact his/her understanding of life-threatening illness and death experiences. Statements such as “Grandma has gone to heaven with God,” or “Daddy is sleeping peacefully” often confuse young children who do not understand abstract language. They may become angry at God or afraid to go to sleep. Well-intentioned statements such as “Big boys don’t cry” or “You’re the man of the house now” may keep a boy from expressing his sadness or fears, or create anxiety about an overwhelming and inappropriate level of responsibility.

By being honest and open to grieving with your child, you can support each other through this difficult time. Communicate honestly and clearly in ways your child can understand. I’m so sorry that your Grandpa died. I love you very much. What can I do to help you? Offer a simple explanation that death occurs when the body stops working. Use examples from nature – the seasons of the year, leaves falling from the trees – to show that all living things have a cycle which ends in death.

Find out what your child(ren) think is going on. Ask them to retell what adults have told them in their own words; then support them and clear up any misconceptions that may be causing fear or anxiety.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

THESE DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS MAY OVERLAP

BIRTH TO PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

- Possess little understanding of death and dying
- Lack language skill to express their grief
- Feel more secure when adults maintain daily routines such as meals, playtimes and bedtimes
- May regress in language, potty skills and exhibit tantrums and irritability

CHILDREN AGES 5 TO 9 YEARS

- May not grasp death's permanence and irreversibility
- Require help to express their thoughts and feelings
- Often complain of physical ailments such as bellyaches and headaches
- Frequently ask shocking or graphic questions about the body.
- May feel responsible for causing the illness or death

PRE-TEENS AND TEENS

- Grief may be complicated as they deal with their own physical/emotional growth
- Desire privacy to deal with their emotions
- Often rely on peers for support
- May assume more adult roles
- Need clear and firm limits
- Desire independence yet are still dependent upon adults
- Often feel guilt and remorse
- May address anger through self-destructive behaviors

HOW SAMARITAN CAN HELP

INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY COUNSELING

Professional counseling for children, teens and families coping with grief and/or loss issues.

BIG HURTS, LITTLE TEARS SUPPORT GROUP

Area's only support group for 3-5 year olds who have experienced grief due to a death.



WAYS YOU CAN HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH DEATH AND DYING EXPERIENCES

EARN THEIR TRUST

- Be honest and open
- Prepare them for what is to come
- Answer questions in clear, simple terms
- Allow and encourage them to share their feelings

OFFER LOVE, COMPASSION AND SUPPORT

- Reassure them they did not cause the illness or death
- Teach them about feelings and healthy coping skills
- Consider using books, music and/or art as avenues of expressing feelings
- Expand their support system to peers, teachers, coaches, ministers, etc.
- Seek professional help as needed
- Prepare them for re-entry to school

PROVIDE STRUCTURE AND CONSISTENCY

- Provide familiar routines
- Set limits and discipline as needed
- Help differentiate between feelings and behaviors

INVOLVE CHILDREN

- Realize that children have a right to say goodbye
- Give them choices
- Ask them if they want to participate in funeral planning (choosing flowers, drawing a picture, writing or reading a poem or remembrance, etc.)
- Ask them if they want to attend funeral or memorial services

Samaritan

LIFE-ENHANCING CARE

(800) 229-8183
SamaritanNJ.org

*Call the Samaritan Center for Grief Support at (800) 596-8550
for more information or to schedule a session or program.*