

Helping A Child After Death

When children are upset or stressed, parents want to say things to help them feel better. There are times, however, when there are no good words to make the hurt feelings go away. One of these times is when a child experiences the death of a family member or friend. This can be a very difficult time, especially if the parent is also grieving the loss.

Grief is what a person feels when someone or something is lost. Children need help to understand what has happened and to express their feelings of grief. This expression of grief is called mourning. Children feel grief on their own, but they need help finding ways to mourn. There are no magic words to say, but there is much a parent can do to help a child cope with the death of a loved one.

Explaining Death

Explaining death to a child should be done with care so that the child is not confused or unnecessarily frightened. A young child may not be able to understand the difference between "gone to heaven" and "gone out of town"-the child may be waiting for the person to return. A family's religious faith can be a great source of strength, but it should be related to a child in a way that he or she can understand. Some religious concepts (for instance, the Christian concept of resurrection) may too abstract to comfort a young child. Likewise, care should be taken when comparing death to familiar events in life. Comparing death to sleep, for instance, can cause a child to fear going to sleep.

Children need honesty about what has happened to help them understand and accept the reality of death. A parent or other caregiver needs to explain what happened to the person who died in a way that the child can understand. It is not necessary to give all the details, and the age and maturity of the child need to be considered. A death due to violence may be especially difficult to explain. A child may hear comments about the death from others and have questions about what really happened. Honesty helps a child understand that it's okay to talk about what happened and helps a child to cope with death. Dealing with what we know can be much easier than dealing with what we don't know.

Attending the Funeral

Many parents question whether or not children should attend funerals. Funerals help many people to accept the reality of a death and to honor the life of the one who has died. Funerals are also occasions where people mourn together. Attending a funeral or visiting the funeral home can also be helpful to children. Here are some points to consider:

Explain to the child what happens at a funeral or visitation. As with any new experience, a child will need an explanation and extra preparation and support if he or she participates.

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Ask if the child is interested in going to the funeral home. Encourage (but do not force) the visitation. Even for adults, going to a funeral home can be stressful.

Take the child to the funeral home without other visitors present. This allows the child to feel comfortable and ask questions. The child can also make a better decision about whether or not to attend the funeral.

Parents can help a grieving child by finding ways that the child can remember and feel connected to the person who died. This help is especially important when a death is sudden and unexpected. In these situations, a child has not had opportunities to prepare for the death and to find a way to say goodbye. If possible, the child should be given something that belonged to the person who died. Such a "memory object" affirms the child's relationship with the one who has died. Sharing memories and stories of times past helps a child continue to feel connected to the person who has died. Holidays, birthdays and anniversaries after a death can be sad days, but they are good times to help a child remember the person who is no longer present.

Setting an Example

Setting an example of how to cope with grief is perhaps the most important task a parent or caregiver faces in helping a child deal with death. Being open to the grief of children can be difficult if parents are feeling overwhelmed with their own grief. Adults need to find resources for their own support and mourning so they can help their children. When communication is open, questions can be asked and needs expressed.

When someone dies, there are no words to make the hurt go away. Parents help their children most by being honest, listening, caring, sharing and giving permission for the whole family to grieve and mourn. Through this experience, a child can learn that even the most difficult times can be faced together. It is a lesson that goes beyond words.