

Grieving Children

Many of us are hesitant to discuss death with our children. However, if we are to help them deal with it we must let them know that it is okay to talk about death. Every child is individual, and how and when we talk about death will depend on their age, experience and wish to do so.

The following information is a general guide to such discussions and we hope it will be of help.

- Encourage children to communicate by listening to them attentively and answering their questions honestly. Be aware that younger children may need to ask the same question many times and need clear and simple answers.
- If there are questions you can't answer, don't make up a story. A child will respect and trust you more if you are honest and just say you don't know or don't know how to explain.
- Children are individuals, so respect their views and feelings. Avoid telling them to react in the same way as an adult.
- Children need reassurance that they have been and will continue to be loved and cared for. During this time children need the comfort of family and familiar surroundings so, if possible, they should remain with the family. Sending them away may increase their fears about being separated from the people they love.
- Be open about your sorrow and tears. This will help children to understand that the emotional reactions they see and experience are normal. Reassure them that they will not last forever.
- Sharing memories, good and not so good, can help children to come to terms with their loss. Ways to encourage this include: talking about the person who has died; making a scrap book or memory box of photographs and other mementos; writing a letter to the deceased or using art work to express feelings.
- Children need to know it's okay for them to go and play with friends or watch a favourite TV show. This reassures them that life still continues on with some things unchanged. It is also healthy for them to mix with friends and talk about the person who has died.
- Be aware of the child's level of comprehension. Some explanations can be very confusing and frightening.

For example:

"Mummy just went to sleep"

May make the child afraid of going to sleep or bed because they may not wake up.

"Grandpa went away on a long journey"

May cause distress because he didn't say goodbye, or brief separations may begin to worry them.

"God needs another little angel in heaven"

Could be frightening as the child may worry God may come and get them as well.

Grief Responses of Young People

Shock

Self destructive behaviour

Disbelief

Guilt

Hopelessness

Fear

Despair

Poor concentration

Denial

Low self esteem

Aggression

Withdrawal

Physical symptoms e.g. headaches,
nausea, eating and sleep disturbances

How To Help

- Show that you care, look beyond appearances
- Acknowledge and believe the young person's pain and distress whatever the loss, large or small
- Explore loss experiences in conversation
- Listen carefully, let the young person do the talking
- Resist the temptation to criticize or give advice
- Go out for a coffee or a film or a walk in the park
- Try to make the young person feel comfortable and comforted
- Don't put a time limit on the process of healing
- Acknowledge important dates and think about ritual and memorial activities e.g. lighting a candle
- Don't panic in the face of strong emotional responses – crying is a healthy release
- Prepare for experiences of grief before they happen through education and open family discussions
- A word to adults – be real and don't be afraid of sharing your own painful memories of adolescence.