

Guiding Children Through Grief

By Barb Grady

This article is intended to reduce the information from my previous article entitled *Helping Children Cope With Death, Loss, and Traumatic Events* into a more concise and usable format. I am motivated, as student of mine recently suffered the loss of her child. This article is dedicated to my student.

Death will touch us all, including children, at some time in our lives, bringing with it the grief that accompanies loss. Death and grief are more inevitable than sex, more certain than taxes, and the one common denominator of all human beings. Grief is not a pathological illness; it is a part of the human condition. We all grieve. We all die.

Yet, educating our children about death and guiding them through grief is avoided in our society. Because we are uncomfortable with the subject, the feelings and questions that arise, we “protect” our children from what is an important learning experience. In shielding them, we deny them the opportunity to express honest feelings. We fail to recognize that by teaching our children about death and grief, we also teach them about life and joy.

When Death Touches

Although children deal with grief in their own ways, guiding them from the start is important. When death occurs in the family or close by, children draw upon their earlier coping skills. Loss and sadness are familiar childhood experiences. Separation fear, one of the dominant feelings expressed when someone in the family dies, is something nearly all infants know by a few months of age; and by two, children are well sensitized to feelings of sadness and measures of comfort. These are the cues that

children draw upon when faced with death at a later stage. Our choice as parents is to stand by silently or participate in the process. By participating we can create a *new* learning experience. We can reinforce the healthy coping skills, introduce new ones, and help our children externalize and deal with the deep feelings that accompany loss.

Say it like it is. When talking about death with your child, it is best to talk about death and not about “passing away,” “being asleep,” or being “gone” or “lost.” When flowers wilt, we do not say they passed away; we say that they died. People, flowers, and the family pet all die. Once we get used to saying the word, it becomes less frightening.

Use words your child can understand. In the book Tell Me, Papa, a kindly grandfather explains death in a way that can be easily grasped: “When someone dies, everything inside of that person stops. The heart stops. The breathing stops. The thinking and the feelings stop. When a person is dead, that person cannot think about things. They cannot feel hurt. They cannot feel hot or cold. When we are dead, we do not have any life in our bodies anymore. What is left is the body...like a peanut shell without the peanut, like an apple peel with no apple, like a school with no children.”

Tell your child yourself. When someone your child cares about dies, it is important that you tell your child—simply and honestly. Let your child know early on that nothing is too sad to talk about together. Children can face honesty with ease. Keep your statements simple and details within their grasp. For example, to a young child you might say, “I have some bad news. _____ died a few minutes ago. Remember how we used to _____? _____ body stopped working.” Then wait for questions, and be prepared to be surprised.

Older children see things differently than younger ones do. A younger child when informed that a sick friend had died asked, "What did they do with her toys?" Different children react to death in different ways. They may pretend they do not care or act as though a death has not affected them. Usually this means they are overwhelmed and need time to let their feelings separate inside. You can support this process by letting your child know that everyone grieves in their own way, and that feelings will come and go, and that when feelings need to be talked out, you will be there.

Encourage questions. Children need to know that their questions are valid and welcome. Do not expect all the questions to come at once, but do realize that inviting them can reduce your child's anxiety. Very young children, up to about age five, cannot understand that death is permanent. To them, people go away and come back.. A three-year-old child I knew, whose baby sister died of SIDS, drew many pictures and mailed them to her sister. This was her way of gently letting go.

Children between the ages of six and nine often think of death as a person. A comment like, "God took her" can sound to the child as though God were a person-snatcher, an agent of death. If your child is within this age range and you do not wish to personify god in this way, now is the time to let your child know that God does not snatch people. One parent I knew explained it this way: "I think _____ died and *then* God came to take him to heaven." If you are a family of faith, it is important to share your beliefs with your children. Let them know, if only to avoid misconceptions at this age, that God does not pull strings to keep us safe or deprive us of life, but rather provides us with loving support through all we face.

Share feelings. Tell your child how *you* feel. Even though children are people-
readers and know how we feel, articulating the feelings sets an example and creates a
bond. Sharing tears can also bring you close together; children need to know that it is all
right for adults to cry too. A shared feeling is a feeling diminished. In the book, Where's
Jess? A child whose baby sibling has died says: "Sometimes when I talk about Jess
Mommy cries. Sometimes I think my talking makes Mommy cry. Mommy smiles. She
says I don't have to be afraid of her tears. I can talk about Jess any time I want to."

Don't make grieving a requirement. Rabbi Earl Grollman, who writes about
children and death, tells a story about a family that was concerned that their child was not
feeling sad when his Grandfather died. When he got to the heart of the matter, the
child's feelings surfaced. "I only met him twice, and both times he had bad breath."

Let your child say goodbye. A funeral is one way to do this. In his book Grief,
Ed Vining writes: "The visitation, as a family and friends gather, is the social release of
the body, the funeral is the spiritual release and the burial is the physical release."
Funerals need not be frightening. I recently attended a beautiful funeral where the
parents spoke, read poems written by family members and expressed their grief. Small
children, both sibling and cousins, attended the funeral and were able to have a memory
that may be comforting in the future. Saying goodbye makes death less frightening and
grief more acceptable. Children can say goodbye to someone they love in a number of
ways.

I attended the funeral of a friend's young daughter that died of cancer. Balloons
were released and filled the sky with bright colors. Young children may want to write or
draw on a balloon and release it. Older children may want to keep a journal, write

poems, or talk privately into a tape recorder. After my sister was murdered, her daughter wrote poetry and later had one published.

Walking Through Grief Together

Families who love together also grieve together. Here are some of the primary concerns that arise for parents wishing to “be there” for their children.

- Should a child attend the funeral? While a child should never be forced to attend, he to she needs to know what will happen and that the family is gathering to say goodbye. I believe that children need to be part of events that are important to their family.
- What is a child’s greatest fear? Even children who are not grieving are most afraid of being abandoned. Children grieving the death of a loved one need to know they will not be left alone to fend for themselves.
- What typical reactions might occur? In younger children you can expect some regression. How many of us do not curl up into the fetal position when we crawl into bed following sadness? Now is the time for extra hugs, reassurance that sadness is normal, and confidence that grieving is something everyone does sooner or later. Earl Grollman has an excellent book [Explaining Death to Children](#) that lists possible reactions for children six and up that also applies to adults. These reactions include: denial, bodily distress, anger at the deceased, guilt, anger towards others, replacement, idealizations, anxiety and panic.

As author Robert Kavanaugh notes, in helping out children deal with death and grief, “Volkswagens do the same job as Cadillacs.” When given love, support, and simple answers to questions, when aware that we are willing to walk with

them and guide them in their grief, our children may surprise us with how well they understand death and grow through grief. It is up to us to take the black shroud off the death image and let some sunshine in.

Literature

For adults: Grief: What It Is and What We Can Do About It, Guiding Children Through Grief, On Children and Death, Explaining Death to Children and Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child.

For children from 2 to 7: Timothy Duck, The Accident, Where's Jess, Grownups Cry Too, Lifetimes, I'll Miss You, Mr. Hooper, How Does It Feel?