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Supporting Children in Grief...
What to say and how to help bereaved children

CHILDREN IN GRIEF

Death is possibly the most difficult event for children to understand and respond to. Nothing has prepared them for death or a funeral, and depending on their age and stage of conceptual development it may be literally impossible to take in.

As adults we can assist young ones by speaking simply, openly and factually about the issues. Giving them permission to ask questions and explaining what is going on puts a secure boundary around their imagination.

We are pleased to offer you a list of recommended reading for young children on loss and grief under the Books and Recommended Reading section of our website and hope that the information in this brochure assists also.

SOME HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

Each child will grieve differently, at different times and in different ways. Often the reality (and permanence) of the death isn't realised until the child develops and grows older. It is not unusual – as an example – for a three year old to appear to take a death 'in their stride' and then some years later show signs of grief when they come to understand concepts such as time and 'forever'.

Listen to and be guided by your child and be open about your own feelings in age appropriate ways. Children use significant adults as emotional guides. If adults talk about their grief and give permission for others to grieve then children can feel more secure about their new feelings.

Give them things to do like making a memory box or memory garden. Allow them to share in your memories as well as share their own so they learn that they are normal.

You can also join them in reading or looking at picture books which cover the topics. There are many beautifully illustrated and sensitively written books we would recommend that could be shared with children even before they experience the death of someone they are close to. As with any life experience, if we can discuss death and learn about it before being confronted with its reality we are much better equipped, and can experience less anxiety and fear.

Provide opportunities:

Their loss may not be expressed in the same ways as adults as children do not have the same emotional control or verbal skills. By giving children opportunities to process what has happened and express their feelings they will grow with their grief rather than become afraid of it. Some activities may be making a memorial garden, filling a memory box, visiting the cemetery or special sites with gifts or looking at photos together.

Be consistent:

Children like consistency. As much as possible, stick to your usual daily routine. Be consistent in your routines and rules about life. The structure of home gives a secure container to explore their feelings and what has happened. To help your child feel calm and safe, encourage him/her to engage in everyday activities, such as playing, mealtimes and telling a bedtime story. While many things may have changed, they will always have people to love and care for them a home, food, friends and toys.

Rules of thumb:

- Say things you will never need to retract.
- Be consistent in the information
- Say things that are clear, simple and use age appropriate language or metaphors like the seasons and butterflies to explain what is happening.

Communicate and reassure:

Explaining to children what is going on in simple terms helps them to understand what is happening. Without this information, children may blame themselves for your feelings or imagine other bad things have happened or could happen.

Model how to grieve:

Children take their cues from adults. If there is a difference between your feelings and your behaviours it can be distressing and confusing for children. They may learn that they have to hide their feelings which can lead to anxiety and depression. Tell them what you are feeling, why you are feeling it and so why you are behaving a certain way. Reassure them that they are good and not to blame for your feelings and situation.

Praise the child's efforts:

This builds self-confidence and makes children feel important. If your child has been indirectly affected by a death, encourage them to show compassion to the bereaved and to help others; he/she will feel strengthened by doing so.

Spend time together:

Simply doing things together can help children feel safe. Make family time a priority whether its time when your sad or happy just being there sends a message of trust and love to them. Encourage your child to do things that can help her/him express feelings and emotions, such as drawing a picture or singing a song together.

Maintain health and wellbeing:

Encourage children to eat healthy foods and engage in daily physical activities. Plan for quiet intimate activities near bedtime such as stories and baths to help them sleep.

Encourage spending time with friends:

Engaging in imaginary play, talking and laughing with other children can be healing for your child.



AS A GENERAL GUIDE

2 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER:

The child can sense the loss and changes in people around them. They will have feelings in response to this. Reassurance is best given through actions of affection, connection and consistent routine. A comfort object like a blanket can also help if they are behaving in a clingy way.

3-5 YEARS OF AGE:

The child views death as a temporary condition. They believe the deceased will return in a short time. Use the child's words to talk about their experiences and use examples from nature to teach them about the normality of life and death. Reassure them that they did not cause the death or other peoples feelings. Reassure them that they are loved and good.

Empowering Children – over 5 years of age:

Give them simple jobs and responsibilities to help maintain a sense of control. Keep them informed about what is happening and give opportunities to make educated decisions.

6-11 YEARS OF AGE:

Let your child know you are there for them and allow the child to take the lead in guiding the conversation. Give the child time to ask questions and discuss their feelings. Address any concerns the child talks about, checking you have understood what he/she is saying. Acknowledge with your child the 'awfulness' of their experience. Encourage your child to come up with ways of coping.

11 YEARS OR OLDER:

From this time children are beginning to think more abstractly. They are searching for meaning and values and are involved in religious and philosophical explorations. Creative expression through poetry, video, music, photos and being available to answer questions is important.

Some children may not want to talk:

Playing, writing or drawing may give you a clue as to how children are feeling but none of these activities should be compulsory. You may get a sense of how your child is coping by observing them as they engage in their own chosen activities. Remember to talk to other carers such as grandparents and teachers to get support and feedback about your child.

TIPS FROM BEREAVED CHILDREN:

"Be present but give me the space and time to process too"
"Let me be included"
"Don't tell me how I should feel"
"Let me grieve in my own way"
"Listen to me, let me feel seen and heard"

FURTHER SUPPORT

BEREAVEMENT AND GRIEF SUPPORT SERVICES

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement - www.grief.org.au | 1300 664 786

Compassionate friends - www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au | (03) 9888 4944 or 1800 641 091

Mercy Western Grief Services - (03) 9364 9838

Road Trauma Support Team - 1300 367 797

Sid and Kids Victoria - 1800 240 400

Victims Support Agency - 1800 819 817

Lifeline - 13 11 14

Griefline - (03) 9935 7400

Mensline - 1300 78 99 78

Kids Helpline - 1800 55 1800

Reach Out - www.reachout.com.au (for adolescents)

Amber Community: Road Trauma Support Team - 1300 367 797

Gather My Crew - www.gathermycrew.org.au

INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT

General Practitioner

Grief Counselling

Art Therapy

Traditional Chinese Medicine

Hypnotherapy

Emotional Freedom

Kinesiology E.M.D.R.

Mindfulness Meditation

Yoga



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