



The 6 Needs of a Grieving Child:

how to companion a student through their grief journey

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Who Am I & What Do I Do



Reflection Time:

Exploring childhood experiences with death

- ▶ Talking to children about death is ...
- ▶ As a society, we teach children that death is ...
- ▶ My first experience with death was ...

How Common is Death to a Child?

- ▶ In the US general population, 6.6% of children (4.5 million) will experience parental death and 1.5% will experience a sibling death before age 18, and these rates are elevated in times of natural disasters, pandemics, and war (Burns et al., [2020](#))
- ▶ Estimated that over 140,000 youth in the U.S. have lost a parent or caregiver due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that number continues to rise, particularly among youth of color (Hillis et al., [2021](#)).
- ▶ Over half (57%) reported that, following the loss, support from family and friends tapered off within the first 3 months; 20% say support tapered off after the first week and 21% say after the first month (*The New York Life Foundation's Bereavement Survey*)

Definitions

- ▶ **Grief:** deep and moving distress caused by loss
- ▶ **Mourn:** to feel or express sorrow or grief, to grieve or lament for the dead
- ▶ **Prolonged grief disorder (DSM-5 tr):** defined as intense yearning or longing for the deceased (often with intense sorrow and emotional pain), and preoccupation with thoughts or memories of the deceased (*in children and adolescents, this preoccupation may focus on the circumstances of the death*)

Definitions

- ▶ **Stigmatized Loss:** losses typically not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. Ex: suicide, drug related death
- ▶ **Traumatic loss:** the loss of loved ones in the context of potentially traumatizing circumstances. Ex: homicide, accidents, natural disasters, and losses resulting from war and terror
- ▶ **Misconception:** a view or opinion that is incorrect based on faulty thinking or understanding

Reflection Time:

Exploring childhood experiences with death

- ▶ When I think about children and funerals, I ...
- ▶ The biggest rule my family had about death was ...
- ▶ One helpful statement someone said to me after the death of a loved one ...
- ▶ One hurtful statement someone said to me after the death of a loved one ...

Common Grief Misconceptions

Grief and Mourning Are the Same

- ▶ **Grief is internal**
 - ▶ Feelings & thoughts
 - ▶ Grief is what happens to us
- ▶ **Mourning is external**
 - ▶ Outward expression of grief
 - ▶ Mourning is what we do with our grief
 - ▶ For children this is expressed in behaviors and through play

Common Grief Misconceptions

Tears are a sign of weakness

- ▶ Crying is the body's natural response to sadness
- ▶ A way of communicating the need to be comforted

Children only grieve for a short time

- ▶ Grief is intertwined with the developmental process
- ▶ Understand that grief & mourning are processes, not events.

Grief is Predictable and Orderly

- ▶ Myth of the Grief Stages
- ▶ Grief is disorganized! Grief is Unique! Grief is Personal

Common Grief Misconceptions

Children are too young to understand

- ▶ Age-appropriate open conversations of death & religious beliefs
- ▶ Use appropriate language when discussing death

Infants & Toddlers are too young to feel grief

- ▶ If they are old enough to love, they are old enough to grieve
- ▶ Will show up as protest behaviors

Parents must “Be Strong”

- ▶ Main caregivers are biggest influence on how children express their grief
- ▶ An opportunity for adults to model healthy grieving

Common Grief Misconceptions

Children should not attend funerals

- ▶ Funerals encourage structure and opportunity to teach importance of rituals
- ▶ Encouraged, but never forced

Grieving children will become damaged adults

- ▶ May have higher risk of ACEs if death was traumatic
- ▶ Risk can be lowered by offering safe loving conditions to mourn their loss openly

We should help them get over it

- ▶ We do not “get over grief”
- ▶ Provides the child an opportunity to teach us what they need

Reflection Time:

Exploring childhood experiences with death

- ▶ Right after my first death experience, I felt ...
- ▶ When I think about MY childhood experiences with death, I remember saying ...
- ▶ When I think about MY childhood experiences with death, I remember doing ...

Common Childhood Grief Responses

- ▶ Grief responses are “teach me” opportunities
- ▶ Each child’s grief experience is unique
- ▶ There are common grief responses you MAY see at each age level
- ▶ Handout available for download at <https://free2grieveresources.godaddysites.com/>

Twelve Dimensions of a Child's Grief

(Dr. Alan Wolfelt)

Shock/Apparent Lack of Feelings

"Daddy is not dead. I'm going to go play now"

A way for them to "dose" their grief by allowing just a little reality at a time.

Physiological changes

"My stomach hurts!"

Ways the child's body is responding to the loss

Regression

"Mommy, please don't go to work today"

The need to return to a sense of protection and security

Twelve Dimensions of a Child's Grief

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Disorganization & Panic

"What's happening to me?"

May feel out of touch with their body and their daily lives.

May fear the duration and intensity of their feelings.

Explosive Emotions

"I hate you"

Feelings of hate, blame, terror, resentment, rage, and jealousy.

Can be directed at anyone available.

Acting Out

"I got in a fight at school today"

Varies upon developmental level.
(see handout)

Twelve Dimensions of a Child's Grief

(Dr. Alan Wolfelt)

Hyper-maturity

"I'm the man of the house now."

Opposite of regressive behavior.
Behaviors may be encouraged by
well meaning adults.

Does not allow the child to openly
mourn at their developmental stage.

Fear

"I'm so scared."

Underlying fear that there will be
no one left to take care of them.

May fear their own death.

Guilt

"It's my fault they died."

"Magical thinking"

This is when they think about
something it will happen.

Twelve Dimensions of a Child's Grief

(Dr. Alan Wolfelt)

Relief

"I am glad Grandma died"

Appropriate feelings when someone that has been suffering dies.

Natural feelings of "now they can focus on me."

Sadness

"There is a big hole in my heart"

Can be the most difficult of grieving children.

Often surfaces with realization the person is not coming back.

Reconciliation

"I miss Mom, but I'm going to be Ok."

Integration of the new reality and being open to moving forward in life.

Reflection Time:

Exploring childhood experiences with death

- ▶ My primary source of emotional support during childhood was ...
- ▶ When death occurred in my family, my parents (caregivers) ...
- ▶ As a child, the needs I had when someone (or something) close to me died were ...

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

- ▶ 1. Acknowledge the reality of the death
- ▶ 2. Embrace the pain of the loss
- ▶ 3. Remember the person who died
- ▶ 4. Develop a new self-identity
- ▶ 5. Search for meaning
- ▶ 6. Let others help you – Now and Always



The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#1- Acknowledge the Reality of the Losses

- ▶ Gently confronting the reality of the death
- ▶ Could take weeks, months, and sometimes years
- ▶ Healthy to move between protesting and encountering
- ▶ Be patient with this need

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#1- Companion Role

- ▶ Comfort through eye contact, comforting voice, appropriate physical comfort that conveys security
- ▶ Help explain what death means. Do this by explaining that the body has stopped working which means they cannot feel pain or can get sick
- ▶ Avoid euphemisms such as “sleep” and “passed away”
- ▶ Avoid attaching adult meaning to a child’s question which are usually quite simple and factual.

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#2- Embracing the Pain of the Loss

- ▶ Embracing is the combination of living in a state of encounter (grief work) and surrender (embracing the mystery of not understanding)
- ▶ Opposite of embracing is attempting to stay “in control” (running from the pain through avoidance, repressing, and denial)
- ▶ Dosing the pain: not overloading the hurt all at one time.

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#2- Companion Role

- ▶ Allow and encourage the child to embrace all thoughts and feelings associated with the death
- ▶ Avoid “overprotecting” the child by having them avoid uncomfortable feelings and thoughts
- ▶ Educate main caregivers on how to create a safe loving space for the child to mourn with no shame. May include helping caregivers find their own grief support system.

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#3- Remember the person who died

- ▶ Convert the relationship from one of presence to one of memory
- ▶ Funerals are for opening not closing
- ▶ Storytelling, Linking objects, visiting special places, photos

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#3- Companion Role

- ▶ Offer natural conversations of the person
- ▶ Being aware of major milestones the child will experience without the person. (ie: graduation, prom, ballgames)
- ▶ Provide meaningful memory work opportunities
 - ▶ The Memory Box by Joanna Rowland

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#4- Develop a new self-identity

- ▶ Forever changed by significant losses
- ▶ A process, not an event
- ▶ May experience heightened dependence on others, feelings of helplessness, frustration, anger, & fear

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#4- Companion Role

- ▶ Ask open-ended questions to solicit their thoughts and feelings.
- ▶ Be aware of well-meaning statements that reinforce the “hyper-mature” false identity
- ▶ Educating caregivers that regressive behaviors are natural

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#5- Search of Meaning

- ▶ “Why” & “How” are common during this part
- ▶ Soul Work; Moving from head to heart
- ▶ Liminal Space: Unsettled, forcing them to reconsider who they are, why they are here, and what life means
- ▶ Takes time, loving companions, and humility

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#5- Companion Role

- ▶ Provide an understanding space to explore the “why’s” and “how’s”
- ▶ Be ok with the “not knowing” answers
- ▶ Enter the child’s mourning journey with a “teach me” mindset

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning

#6- Let Others help you = Now and always

- ▶ The child and family will need support long after the death
- ▶ Quality and Quantity of support is very important
- ▶ Understanding that finding help outside of family may be necessary

The 6 Central Needs of Mourning


#6- Companion Role

- ▶ Have well trained grief support referrals
- ▶ Educate teachers and caregivers on natural grief responses
- ▶ Communicate with educators throughout the child's time in school

Reflection Time:

Exploring childhood experiences with death

- ▶ When I think about my own childhood experience with death, what will I do different for the children I companion ...



“To companion grieving children means to be an active participant in their healing. When you as a caregiver companion grieving children, you allow yourself to learn from their unique experiences. You let them teach you instead of the other way around. You make the commitment to walk with them as they journey through grief.”

Dr. Alan Wolfelt *“Companioning the Grieving Child: A soulful guide for caregivers”*

Let's Get Coffee

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