



HELPING CHILDREN GRIEVE THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

When a loved one dies, adults may fail to guide the children through the days following the loss. **A child needs to be forewarned** that parents and relatives might be emotional and cry. This can be shocking to a child. A friend or relative should stay with the child at the funeral, especially when parents are too involved in their own grief. Including the child in the preparations—preparing clothes, arranging flowers, setting the table, etc.—can alleviate the feeling of helplessness and make the child feel empowered.

A child does not grieve like an adult. Adults grieve more continuously, while children live in the moment. They may seem happy and playful until something reminds them of the loss, and they suddenly need comfort. Adults must be alert enough to recognize the moments of grief in the child when they arise.

Understanding how children cope with death is important for helping them grieve:

Ages 0-2: Toddlers do not grieve like adults; they do not yet see themselves as separate people, so they experience “separation anxiety.” They also have not yet established a sense of “object permanence”—the perception that their loved one still exists even when they are out of sight. They need someone to reestablish that sense of permanence (especially when a parent has died) by bonding with them and telling them they are cared for.

Ages 2-7: The child knows what death is but does not yet know that death is permanent and irreversible. The child uses “magical thinking,” the idea that he magically caused it. He needs to be told he is not to blame.

Ages 7-11: The child knows that death is irreversible and permanent. But since he is not yet an abstract thinker, he will look for concrete reasons for the death. If he cannot find one, he might blame someone, most often himself. He needs to be told that some things “just happen,” and it’s not anyone’s fault.

Teen years: A teen perceives death like other adults. But she might feel guilty for having pulled away from a parent prior to the parent’s death. She needs to be told that her individuation (stepping away from parents to establish her own values, faith beliefs, likes and dislikes, etc.) was not a personal affront to the one who died. If she is not told this, she may feel tempted to stop or even reverse the process of individuation and go back to the compliant and conforming child.

Even the strongest parents can become so involved in their own grieving that some of these mistakes happen. Most children recover. Children of dysfunctional families often do not. Their parents may not have had anyone to help them with their own griefs when they were children, so they may be ill-equipped to help their children grieve. These children often bury their grief. Later, in adulthood, another

loss can trigger the buried pain, but the seeker might not connect the dots and understand where the pain is really coming from. In this case inner healing is needed.

Grief counseling is recommend for all, but is especially imperative and beneficial for children.

Modified for Free to Be Me, from Elijah House Int. Unresolved Grief