



When someone we love dies...

When a loved one or a friend dies, it is difficult to know how to help our children. Often adults do not quite know how to understand or explain a death, particularly if we are working through our own grief. The death of a child is particularly difficult to understand.

Depending on your child's age and personality, your child may have a different response than you expect. Children will often respond differently based upon how well they knew and interacted with the person who died. So how can a parent help?

Be Honest

By talking about the death, you create a forum for children to ask questions. The fear surrounding death often comes from not understanding what happened, and children will often worry that something similar will happen to them or to those closest to them. Answer questions honestly, simply and factually. For example, if a death occurs suddenly and unexpectedly, such as in an accident, explain what happened without giving extensive details.

Expect Questions

Children will often want to know if something similar could happen to them, or to you. Reassure children that while accidents sometimes happen, you do everything you can to keep your family safe - you wear seatbelts, drive carefully, are cautious and have family safety rules. If someone dies from an illness, explain that the illness was not contagious, and that your family does many things to stay healthy, such as eating well, getting exercise, and getting regular checkups. Children may often have misconceptions that their behavior somehow may have caused the death. For example, "If only I had been nicer to ..., this wouldn't have happened." Reassure your child that their own behavior had nothing to do with the person's death. By answering questions honestly and as matter-of-factly as possible, you will help reassure your child.

Explain that they may have a range of emotions

When a loved one dies, children may have a range of emotions depending on their personality and experience - and how we, as the adults, are coping. Explain that all feelings are normal and ok - anger, sadness, disbelief, anxiousness. Empathize with your child and let them know your feelings. It might also be helpful to have them share memories and feelings about the person who died, and that talking helps get those feelings out in the open. Encourage them to share feelings through talking, writing in a journal, or coloring a picture.

Avoid Euphemisms

Although it may be tempting to say things such as "They are in a better place", "They went away" or "They went to sleep," these types of phrases confuse and worry children. Children take things literally so they may worry that when you go away, you may die.

Find a way to help your child honor the person who has died

Often, children will not feel comfortable with going to a memorial or funeral service. If you are planning on taking them to a service, explain what typically happens at a memorial or funeral so they know what to expect. Find out if there will be an open casket and discuss this with your child. Remember to let them know that people may be sad or crying.

Encourage your child to find a way to honor and remember their loved one. Researching and making a donation to a charity is a great way to honor a loved one. Writing in a journal, drawing pictures, planting a tree or participating in a charity event such as a walk for cancer, may be appropriate and be a good outlet. If you participate in any religious activities, help your child understand your beliefs.

Work with the School

Be sure to let the school counselor know if your child is having a particularly difficult time coping with the loss of their loved one. The counselor can talk to your student and keep a close eye out for any necessary assistance. The counselor will also ask if he/she can share information with the classroom teacher.

Know that grieving is a Process

There is no timeline for grief. There will be days when things seem "back to normal" and then an event or activity may bring back those difficult memories. If, after an extended time, your child is experiencing difficulty sleeping, eating, or avoiding activities which they typically enjoyed in the past, talk to the school counselor or mental health professional. These may be signs of depression and should be addressed.

The death of a loved one or friend is never easy. It takes time and energy to get through the hard times. Make sure to take care of yourself, eat, exercise and get enough sleep. Give yourself time to express your own feelings. By showing your child that you can get through a difficult loss, you help them learn coping skills which they will need later in life.

Resources

http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/death.html?tracking=P_RelatedArticle

Tear Soup by Pat Schweibert

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss (Elf-Heinz Books for Kids) by R. W. Alley

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: 20th Anniversary Edition by Leo F. Buscaglia

Mending Peter's Heart by Maureen Wittbold