



The Elisabeth
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The Grief of Children

by Susan Woolsey

One of the most difficult tasks following the death of a loved one is discussing and explaining the death with children in the family. This task is even more distressing when the parents are in the midst of their own grief.

Because many adults have problems dealing with death they assume that children cannot cope with it. They may try to protect children by leaving them out of the discussions and rituals associated with the death. Thus, children may feel anxious, bewildered, and alone. They may be left on their own to seek answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and reassurance of those around them.

All children will be affected in some way by a death in the family. Above all, children who are too young for explanations need love from the significant people in their lives to maintain their own security. Young children may not verbalize their feelings about a death in the family. They hold back their feelings because they are so overwhelming. As a result a child may appear to be unaffected. It is more common for them to express their feelings through behavior and play. Regardless of this ability or inability to express themselves, children do grieve, often very deeply.

Common Expressions of Children's Grief

Experts have determined that those in grief pass through four major emotions: fear, anger, guilt, and sadness. It should be remembered that everyone who is touched by a death experiences these emotions to some degree -grandparents, friends, physicians, nurses, and children. Each adult and child's reactions to death are individual in nature. Some common reactions are outlined below.

Shock

The child may not believe the death really happened and will act as though it did not. This is usually because the thought of death is too overwhelming.

Physical Symptoms

The child may have various complaints such as headache or stomachache and fear that he too will die.

Anger

Being mostly concerned with his own needs, the child may be angry at the person who died because he feels he has been left "all alone" or that God didn't "make the person well." Children will frequently act out their anger toward their parents because it is "safe."

Guilt

The child may think that he caused the death by having been angry with the person who died, or he may feel responsible for not having been "better" in some way.

Anxiety and Fear

The child may wonder who will take care of him now or fear that some other person he loves will die. He may cling to his parents or ask other people who play an important role in his life if they love him.

Regression

The child may revert to behaviors he had previously outgrown, such as bedwetting or thumbsucking.

Sadness

The child may show a decrease in activity-being "too quiet."

It is important to remember that all of the reactions outlined above are normal expressions of grief in children. In the grief process, time is an important factor. Experts have said that six months after a significant death in a child's life, a normal routine should be resuming. If the child's reaction seems to be prolonged, seeking professional advice of those who are familiar with the child (such as teachers, pediatricians, clergy) may be helpful.

Explanations That May Not Be Helpful

Outlined below are explanations that adults may give children hoping to explain why the person they loved has died. Unfortunately, simple, pat, but dishonest answers can only serve to increase the fear and uncertainty that the child is feeling. Children tend to be very literal--if an adult says that "Grandpa died because he was old and tired," the child may wonder when he too will be too old; he certainly gets tired - what is tired enough to die?

"Susie will sleep in peace forever. "

This explanation may result in the child's fear of going to bed or to sleep.

"It is God's will."

The child will not understand a God who takes a loved one because he needs that person himself; or "God took him because he was so good." The child may decide to be bad so God won't take him too.

"Susie went on a long trip and won't be back for a long time."

The child may wonder why the person left without saying goodbye. Eventually the child will realize Susie isn't coming back and feel that something he did caused Susie to leave.

"John was sick and went to the hospital where he died. "

The child will need an explanation about "little" and "big" sicknesses. Otherwise, the child may be extremely fearful if he or someone he loves has to go the hospital in the future.

Things to Keep In Mind

The child may wish to be a part of the family rituals.

Explain these to him and include him in deciding how he will participate. Remember that he should be prepared beforehand, told what to expect, and have a supporting adult with him. Do not force him to do anything he doesn't feel comfortable doing.

The child may show regressive behavior.

A common reaction to stress is reverting to an earlier stage of development. (For example, a child may begin thumb-sucking, or bedwetting; or, may need to go back into diapers or have a bottle for a time). Support the child in this and keep in mind that these regressions are temporary.

Adults can help prepare a child to deal with future losses of those who are significant by helping the child handle smaller losses through sharing their feelings when a pet dies or when death is discussed in a story or on television.

In helping children understand and cope with death, remember four key concepts: be loving, be accepting, be truthful, and be consistent.

Adapted from an article by: Susan Woolsey, Maryland SIDS information and Counseling Project and the National SIDS Clearinghouse.

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