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What Do We Tell the Children?

By John Kennedy Saynor



When a death occurs in a family, there are endless decisions to be made and many different people to take into consideration when making those decisions. Children are a very significant part of the family unit and it is important to consider their needs in light of the fact that this event will impact them for the rest of their lives.

In this article, I would like to consider the factors that may complicate the grief of a child. Then, I will look at how adults can provide the best support. First, the complicating factors.

The age of the child and past experience with death. If this is the first experience a child has had with death, then it is more important that the adults in the family pay special attention

to the needs of the child. A mismanaged death event may have serious emotional implications for the child well into adulthood.

The inability of adults to engage the children in healthy discussion. If a child is not included in the family discussions about the death, or are only told part of the story, they will fill in the details with their imagination. These details often do the child a great deal of harm.

Sudden or traumatic death. When death is caused by murder, suicide, a fatal accident or a sudden, fatal illness, an unstable environment may be created in the home. The adults are often unable to take the time to explain to the children what has happened. Indeed, the adults may not be able to explain what has happened!



If there have been a number of deaths of family members or close friends, a child may feel abandoned.

Death involving social stigma. Social stigma and shame frequently accompany death related to AIDS, suicide and murder. Children often feel too embarrassed to talk about what has happened and will withdraw for fear of being ridiculed or ostracized at school. Unfortunately, this embarrassment is often imparted to the children by the adults in their home.

Multiple losses. If there have been a number of deaths of family members or close friends, a child may feel abandoned. If the only parent of a child dies, it may be that the child will be forced to move from the family home, change schools and even leave the city or town where he or she was living. All of these changes represent losses for the child and may complicate the grieving process.

Past relationship with the deceased. If the child was abused (physically or sexually), neglected or abandoned by a loved one, there may be ambivalent feelings when that person dies. When the abusive, alcoholic father of a young girl died, she was relieved to have him out of her life. However she also felt guilty for feeling relieved and having no remorse at his death. Feelings like this are often unexpressed for years and may require the assistance of a counsellor to resolve them.

The grief process of adults in the family. What kind of role models are the adults in the family when it comes to grieving? If adults are able to grieve in a healthy way, the children will learn from them. The opposite is also true. When adults cannot deal with their grief, the children learn negative grief behaviour. These negative patterns are often carried over into adulthood.

These are a few factors that may complicate the grieving process of a child. Over the past few years a great deal has been done to increase the education of families in dealing with chil-

dren. Many advances have been made. Below are a few simple tips that can help adults help children to make a safe journey through their grief.

How do we help the children?

There are two important principles to observe when dealing with children at this time. First, be honest with the children, no matter how difficult that is. It is important to begin this honesty if and when a family member receives a diagnosis of a terminal illness. It is unfair to children to tell them that grandpa is going to get better, when in reality, he isn't!

When death is sudden and perhaps tragic, honesty is still the best policy. I remember a young mother whose depressed husband shot himself while the children were away at school. The girls were 12, nine and five. One by one she took them aside that afternoon, to tell them exactly what had happened. They asked questions immediately and, because their mother was open with them about the events, continued to ask questions that you would expect children this age to ask. They were fully involved in the funeral that was held for their father.

Avoid euphemisms. Telling a child that someone has, "gone away" or "passed away" opens the door for the child to imagine all kinds of things. I knew of a young girl who was told that her uncle had gone on a holiday! It was years later that she finally learned that he was dead. Imagine what she was thinking as she wondered why he would go away and leave her aunt and cousins for so long.



First, be honest with the children, no matter how difficult that is.

Second, it is important to be simple in your explanation.

Second, it is important to be simple in your explanation. It isn't always necessary to tell the child everything at one sitting. Give the child time to absorb the information you have given them, and then the questions will come. Later in the evening, after the young mother explained to her girls that their father had shot himself, the eldest daughter said, "So does this mean you will get married again?" Let the child lead by their questioning and in some ways it will be easier for the adults.

More tips on helping children:

Encourage creative involvement in the funeral. Older children in the family may want to write a poem or sing a song. Younger children can be encouraged to find something personal that they would like to place in the casket. Many funeral homes provide boards for the family to create a collage of pictures for the service. This is a good way to involve children. Younger children can be helped to draw a picture or write a letter to the one who

has died. Perhaps an older family member would be willing to read the letter during the funeral service. Don't hesitate to ask the children what they would like to do and see what ideas they may have.

Encourage the children to talk about the one who died.

By reminding them of things the deceased said or did, you give the children permission to talk about the deceased. They may not have the language to describe how they feel. Ask the child, "Do you feel sad, lonely, angry?" These conversations may generate tears or laughter. No matter which happens, it will, in the end, be helpful.

Offer the children something that belonged to the one who died. If the child is too young to make a decision, then the adults may want to put something away for when the child is older. A picture of the one who died is often something the children will cherish. If adults discuss this decision with the children involved, it will have special meaning for them.



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Discover creative ways of observing special family events. This is especially true during the first year after a death. Birthdays, anniversaries and special seasons such as Christmas can be times of insecurity for the children who will wonder how these events will be observed. Many families have learned that children often have good ideas and can provide valuable input into how these events can be observed after a family member has died.

In closing, time spent with the children at this time will help them face death in a healthy way through their lifetime. Time, patience and willingness to tackle a difficult subject will not only help the children, but will be a great benefit for the adults as well.

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Common Feelings, Thoughts and Behaviours of the Grieving Child

- Child retells events of the deceased's death and funeral.
- Child dreams of the deceased.
- Child feels the deceased is with him or her in some way.
- Child rejects old friends and seeks new friends who have experienced a similar loss.
- Child wants to call home during the school day.
- Child can't concentrate on homework or classwork.
- Child bursts into tears in the middle of class.
- Child seeks medical information on the death of the deceased.
- Child worries excessively about his or her own health.
- Child sometimes appears to be unfeeling about loss.
- Child becomes "class clown" to get attention.
- Child is overly concerned with caretaking needs.

From: *Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children* by Linda Goldman
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