

Children's Grief



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HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH GRIEF

Grief is an extremely difficult and engaging process. One must focus on him/herself during this period, and rightly so. Many times, however, we overlook the fact that grief comes in all sizes and ages. Therefore, children are often ignored during mourning, with the rationale that “they wouldn’t understand”. The grieving process in children is highly complex, since so much depends upon each child’s stage of development. For instance, a 3-year old’s understanding of death and the mourning process will be quite different from that of a 10 year-old. Both of them would be very different from a 16-year old. Yet, there are many fundamental similarities between a child’s grief and the adult mourning process. It is important to understand that grief work provides vast potentials for growth for all ages. Following are a list of suggestions in helping your child through the grief process.

1. Set time aside to talk with the child – explain the events occurring, why you are crying, etc.
2. Use basic words like “die” and “dead” to convey the message.
3. Use the deceased person’s name when referring to him/her.
4. Avoid the phrases that “soften the blow”; phrases such as “sleeping”, “went on a vacation”, “God took them”, etc. will only confuse and scare a child.
5. Let the child ask questions – answer truthfully! Be honest, simple and direct. If you don’t understand something, let the child know that, too.
6. Be sensitive to the age of the child, and his/her level of understanding – don’t offer information beyond the child’s comprehension, as it will only confuse matters.
7. Tell stories that will increase the child’s awareness.
8. Read or have the child read children’s books related to death (many are available).
9. Play with the child (e.g. dolls, drawing, imagining) in ways that will allow the child to express his/her feelings.
10. Watch for TV programs that might help the child’s understanding.
11. Read books yourself on helping a child through grief – there are many excellent ones.
12. Talk about God with the child – pray with the child.
13. Share your feelings and experience with child if he/she is able to understand them.
14. Let the child participate if he/she wants to: e.g. going to the funeral, visiting the cemetery. However, it is very important that you don’t pressure the child into doing any of these things.
15. Accept help from others to watch the children and talk with them – but remember, you are the most important person to the child!

16. You are a role model for the child – if you hide your grief, they will learn to hide it too.
17. We should (as much as possible) have an understanding of our own grieving process, since these things are communicated to the child.
18. Let the child vent his/her emotions and acknowledge them.
19. Watch for tell-tale signs of maladjustments, e.g. eating and/or sleeping disturbances over a long period of time.
20. Seek pastoral or family counseling if the grief is unresolved.
21. Watch for earlier mourning experiences of the child. For example, a child often experiences death for the first time when a pet dies.
22. Remember, a child will have the same feelings we have, but a different level of understanding.
23. Communicate to the child your appreciation of having had the deceased person around.
24. Discuss and have the child recognize changes in routine due to the death.
25. Plan something (e.g. a vacation) that you and the child can look forward to.
26. This is perhaps the most important of all – please do not be disappointed or angry if the child does not understand or appreciate the death! They are going through a learning experience and discovery – give them time!

The Child's Loss: Death, Grief and Mourning

by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. and Jana Rubenstein, M.Ed., LPC

For most children, death is a new experience. And like all new experiences, the unknown can be confusing and frightening. Most children do not know what to expect following the loss of a family member or friend. Young children may not understand what death really means and may be confused or even frightened by the reactions of other family members. In the case of traumatic death, the confusion and fear is even greater.

For adults, death is more familiar and the grieving process is something many adults know firsthand. Most adults have experienced the range of feelings that often come with traumatic loss - anger, confusion and sadness, and have learned ways to cope with loss. This may not be the case for children, particularly young children.

At the same time, children will seek answers and comfort from their caregivers and other adults in their lives. Yet in the face of traumatic death, adults often feel helpless in this role. While adults cannot have answers to all the questions that children may have about death, they can help children better understand the grieving process.

This guide addresses some of the key issues related to the child's complex set of reactions that often follow traumatic death. While focused on traumatic death, this information may be helpful to families, caseworkers, teachers and other adults working and living with any grieving children.

This simple guide is intended to inform and provide general principles. It is not intended to be comprehensive or to exclude other observations or approaches to helping grieving children.

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I talk about the traumatic event?

Don't be afraid to talk about the traumatic event. Children do not benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds.' If a child senses that adults around her are upset about the event, she may not bring it up even if she wants to. In traumatic death, there are two central challenges for the child: processing the actual traumatic event (e.g., the shooting, the accident, the fire), and coping with loss of the loved one. In the immediate post-traumatic period, the child's thoughts will be dominated by the terrorizing event. The loss of the loved one looms as a shadow in these first weeks. Over time, however, the child's thoughts and feelings will be dominated by loss. The primary emotion of the first phase is fear; the primary emotion of the second is sadness.

In the long run, without freely talking about the loss or expressing sadness, anger and confusion, the child's recovery will be more difficult. Children model their emotional expression and behavior after their caregivers. It can be very helpful for a child to know that adults feel sad, too, and for you to share with them how you cope with in your own life. Over time, helping the child keep part of the loved one with them in memories, rituals, habits, beliefs, and behaviors can be very useful. The formal mourning rituals and beliefs of the child's culture or religion can be very helpful as well.

With that said, in traumatic death, especially if the child was a witness to the traumatic event, until the child can cope somewhat with the traumatic event, their capacity to mourn the loved one can be

impaired. That is why it is not only ok to talk about the traumatic event, it is critical for the child long-term recovery of the child. The central issue becomes *how* you talk about it.

How should I talk about this event?

In the first few days or weeks following the trauma, caregivers should sit down with the child and tell them how it is very normal to think about the traumatic event. Adults should share some of their feelings and thoughts about the event as well. When discussing this issue with children, be sure to use age-appropriate language and explanations. The timing and language used are important. The child will very likely be very quiet. Don't worry about that. Immediately following the death, the child will not be very capable of processing complex or abstract information. Invite them to come and talk about it anytime they want. And from then on, let the child take the lead as to when, how long, and how much you talk with them about the trauma. Each child will have a different style of coping — some children will not talk much, some will talk about it to strangers. It is not unusual for a six-year-old to announce to her new kindergarten teacher, "My mother got shot." And it may not be unusual for a 15-year-old boy to never talk to *any* adults about the traumatic murder of his brother.

As the child gets further away from the event, she will be able to focus longer, digest more, and make more sense of what has happened. Don't be surprised if the child even acts as if the loved one is not dead or that "Mommy" will be coming back. Sometimes young children act as if they have not 'heard' anything you have said. It takes many individual moments of sad clarity for the reality of the loss to actually sink in for young children. Between these moments of harsh reality, children use a variety of coping techniques — some of which can be confusing or upsetting for adults.

Listen to the child, answer their as best you can. As you answer you can provide comfort and support. We often have no adequate explanations about senseless or traumatic death; it is just fine to tell children that you do not know why something happened or that you get confused and upset by it, too. In the end, listening and comforting a child without avoiding or over-reacting will have critical and long-lasting positive effects on the child's ability to cope with traumatic loss.

During this long process, the child continues to 're-experience' the loss. In play, drawing and words, the child may repeat, re-enact and re-live some elements of the traumatic loss. Surviving adults will hear children ask the same questions again and again. In addition, the child may develop profound "empathic" concerns for others experiencing loss, including cartoon characters and animals — "Where is Mickey Mouse's mother?" Or seeing a dead bird they may ask, "Who is taking care of the baby birds now?"

The child will experience and process the very same material differently at various times following the death. In the long run, the opportunity to process and re-process many times will facilitate healthy coping. This re-processing may take place throughout a given child's development. Even years after the death of a mother or a sibling, a child may 'revisit' the loss and struggle to understand it from their current developmental perspective.

One of the most important elements in this process is that children of different ages have different styles of adapting, and different abilities to understand abstract concepts such as death. Children at different ages have very different concepts of death; for example, very young children may have little appreciation of the finality of death. **Be sure not to associate sleep and death.** When these two become associated, it is not surprising that children become afraid of sleep. Children may become afraid of loved ones going to sleep. Try to get some understanding from the child of what she thinks death is — does she have a view of afterlife, are there specific fears about death and so forth. The more you understand about the child's concept of death, the easier it will be for you to communicate in a meaningful fashion.

Should I talk to others about the traumatic event?

Yes. If you and the child's caregivers feel it's appropriate, you can help to inform adults and children in the child's world what has happened. Let other teachers, counselors, parents of the child's friends, and, if appropriate, the child's peers know some of the pain that this child is living with. In some cases, older children can benefit by participating in this process. Sometimes this can help the people in the child's life be more patient, understanding or nurturing. People can often be intolerant or insensitive when dealing with the pain of a grieving child, sometimes asking, "Isn't it about time he got over this?" When you see that this is occurring, don't be shy about taking this person aside and helping him understand what the child is going through.

What is the difference between grief and mourning?

Grief is the label for the set of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical reactions that are seen following the death of a loved one. Normal grief responses may include denial, emotional numbing, anger, rage, rushes of anxiety (pangs), sadness, fear, confusion, difficulty sleeping, regression in children, stomach upset, loss of appetite, "hysterical materializations" (transient visual or auditory misperceptions of the loved one's image or voice) and many other potential symptoms. These symptoms are similar to those often seen in the acute post-traumatic period.

Mourning is the formalized process of responding to the death. This includes memorial services, funerals, wakes, mourning dress and so forth. These semi-ritualized approaches are very useful in organizing and focusing the grief reaction in the immediate post-death period. It is important to allow children to participate in elements of this process. A major healing element of mourning is that it allows the grieving person to "have control over" the way in which trauma and loss are experienced. Rather than sitting alone with recurring intrusive thoughts about the death, one can, in a controlled fashion, recall the lost one without focusing on the death event. The degree of control in coping with a traumatic event is very important in determining how destructive the event becomes over time.

How long should grief last?

While grief is normal, persisting grief reactions are not. In the same way that a persisting acute reaction to trauma can signify major problems, so can persisting grief reactions. If the symptoms listed above last for six months or longer, or if the symptoms interfere with any aspect of functioning, they need to be addressed. If the child is in therapy, caregivers should communicate this with her therapist. You can also let the child's caregivers know whether school performance has been affected. Watch for changes in patterns of play and loss of interest in activities. Be observant. Be patient. Be tolerant. Be sympathetic. These children have been hurt and are in continuing pain.

Should I be concerned when a child says she hears her deceased father's voice?

Expect unusual "sensory" experiences. During the first six months following the loss, children (and adults) will often experience unusual visual, auditory, or tactile sensations. A child may think she hears her dead mother's voice in the next room; she may catch a glimpse of her mother in a crowded mall; out of the corner of her eye, the child may catch mother's reflection in a window. At bedtime or upon

waking, these misperceptions are more common. They may be disturbing to parents, caregivers, and the child. Reassure the child. These 'visions' are often interpreted in context of a religious belief system — "Mommy came back to tell me it was okay; she is still with me." This can be important for the child, and there is no reason to undermine these feelings. These "hysterical materializations" are common, and often mislabeled as visual or auditory "hallucinations." If you have questions about these symptoms, discuss them with an experienced mental health professional or physician. It may also be helpful to speak directly with the child's caregivers about what is happening.

Do children understand events accurately?

Young children often make false assumptions about the causes of major events. Unfortunately these assumptions may include some sense that they were at fault for the event — including the death of a loved one. Adults often assume that causality is clear: someone dies in a car accident, is killed in a drive-by shooting, or dies in a fire. The child, however, may very easily distort an event, and come to the wrong conclusions about causality. "Mom died in the car accident because she was coming to get me at school. The other driver was mad at her;" "My brother is dead because he was helping me with my homework. The person that shot my brother was really shooting at me, and hit my brother because he was in my room." "The fire was God's way of punishing (or making an example of) my family." In many of these distorted explanations, children assume some degree of responsibility for the death. This can lead to very destructive and inappropriate feelings of guilt. Try to correct any misperceptions immediately. And be prepared to correct these false, destructive ideas again and again.

Be clear. Explore the child's evolving sense of causality. Correct and clarify as you see false reasoning develop. Over time, the ability of the child to cope is related to the ability of the child to understand. While some elements of death and tragedy will always remain beyond understanding, explain this to the child: "I don't know some things we can never really understand." If the child feels that they share the unknown and unknowable with an adult, they feel safer. Don't let the child develop a sense that there is a secret about the event — this can be very destructive. Let the child know that adults cannot and will not understand some things either.

What can I do to help?

In summary, there are a number of important things you can do as a prominent figure in a child's life to help him cope with the loss he has suffered.

1. Be honest, open and clear. Whenever possible, adults should give children the facts regarding the death. While there is no need to describe great lingering detail, the important details should be given. These may be horrifying, but it is always important to give factual information to the child. The imagination of a child will "fill in" the details if they are not given. Too often, these imagined details are distorted, inaccurate, and more horrifying than the actual details, and can ultimately interfere with the long-term healing process.

2. Do not avoid the topic when the child brings it up. Similar to other trauma, the adults around the child need to be available when the child wants to talk, but should avoid probing when the child does not want to talk. This may mean answering one question, or struggling with a very difficult question. "Does it hurt when you burn to death?" Don't be surprised if in the middle of your struggle for the "right" answer, the child returns to play and acts disinterested. The child has been unable to tolerate the level of emotional intensity and are coping with it by avoiding it at that point.

Children will sense if the topic is emotionally difficult for adults around them. A child will try to please adults by either avoiding emotional topics or persisting with topics that she senses they find more

pleasant. Try to gauge your own sense of discomfort and directly address this with the child. It is reassuring to children that they are not alone in some of their emotional upset.

Children look to adults to understand and interpret their own inner states. Younger children will even mirror the nature and intensity of an adult's emotions. So if you feel you will be unable to control your emotions when you are trying to help the child, you will need to use some coping strategies yourself. Take a few moments, collect yourself and then try to help the child. It is only human to lose control and be very emotional in these moments. After you feel more composed, you can help the child understand how you were overcome with emotion, "Just like you feel sometimes." Explain that you struggle to understand too — that "We need to help each other when we are sad."

3. Be prepared to discuss the same details again and again. Expect to hear things from the child that seem as if they didn't "hear" you when you told them the first time. The powerful, pervasive implications of death for the child can be overwhelming indeed. The child's responses to death of a parent, sibling, or other loved one will be similar to the child's responses to other traumatic events. This will include emotional numbing, avoidance, sadness, regression, episodic manifestations of anger, frustration, fear of the unknown (e.g., the future), helplessness, and confusion.

The child will have recurring, intrusive, and emotionally evocative recollections of the loved one, and about the death of the loved one. If there is no clear image of the death, the child will imagine various scenarios. These images will return over and over again. As they do, the child (if she feels safe and supported by the adults around her) will ask about death, the specifics of the death, and the loved one. Patiently, repeat clear, honest facts for the child. If you don't know something — or if you also have wondered about the nature of death or a detail in this specific loss — tell the child. Help the child explore possible explanations, and help the child understand that you and others can and do live with many unknowns. In this process, let the child know, however, that there are things we do know — things we can understand. Bring positive memories, images and recollections of the loved one into the conversation.

4. Be available, nurturing, reassuring, and predictable. All of these things make the child's work easier. She feels safe and cared for. The loss of parents, siblings and other loved ones is extremely traumatic, and will forever change these children's lives. The child has, in some sense, a lifelong task of working, re-working — experiencing and re-experiencing the loss of these loved ones. Each holiday, each family occasion, will bring the loss, the death, and the ghost of the loved one to this child. Available, nurturing, and caring caregivers, teachers, therapists, and caseworkers will all make this journey easier.

5. Understand that surviving children often feel guilty. A child surviving when family members die may often feel guilty. This can be a very destructive and pervasive belief. The guilt children feel is related to the false assumptions they make about the event. An important principle in this process is that children do not know how to verbalize or express guilt in the same fashion as adults. Guilt, as expressed by children, may often be best observed in behaviors and emotions that are related to self-hatred and self-destruction. The child will not likely be able to articulate that survivor guilt is intimately related to their sense of worthlessness or self-abusive/destructive behaviors.

The children surviving a parent's sudden death will have great survivor guilt. "Was there something wrong or bad about me? I could have been there — I should have been there." These thoughts will recur in any variety of permutations. And most of the time, the outcome of these thoughts will be guilt. If these children's caregivers, teachers, and therapists can minimize these potentially escalating and destructive ideas, the child's recovery will be eased.

6. Take advantage of other resources. There are many other well-trained professionals willing to help you and the child in your care with these problems. Take advantage of them. Always remember that the loss does not go away, but the way children experience loss will change with time, hopefully maturing in ways that make it easier to bear. The traumatic loss of a parent, a sibling, and a peer will always be with

these children. With time, love, and understanding, however, children can learn to carry the burdens of traumatic loss in ways that will not interfere with their healthy development.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS TO HELP THEIR CHILD THROUGH GRIEF

Note to all parents or caregivers. The best thing you can do for your grieving children is to offer loving support. Hugs and touch are so healing. Listen to the children in your care and really hear what they are saying. And create times for your children to feel safe to talk about whatever might be on their minds. The following will also be of help.

- As soon as possible after the death, set time aside to talk to your child.
- Give your child the facts in a simple manner – be careful not to go into too much detail. Your child will ask more questions as they come up in his or her mind.
- If you can't answer their questions, it is okay to say, "I don't know how to answer that, but perhaps we can find someone to help us."
- Use the correct language – say the word "dead" for example. Do not use phrases such as: "He's sleeping," or "God took her," or "He went away."
- Ask your children questions to better understand what they may be thinking or feeling. "What are you feeling?" "What have you heard from your friends?" "What do you think happened?"
- Explain your feelings to your child, especially if you are crying. Give them permission to cry too. We are their role models and it is appropriate for children to see our sadness and to share our feelings with them.
- Use the given name of the deceased when speaking of him or her.
- Understand the age and level of comprehension of your child. Speak to that level.
- Talk about feelings, such as: sad, angry, feeling responsible, scared, tearful, depressed and worried. Discuss ways to express those feelings.
- Read a book on childhood grief so you have a better understanding of what your child may be experiencing.
- Read a book on death to your child. Take time to discuss what you have read and relate it to what is happening to you.
- Before taking your child to the funeral, talk about the rituals of the viewing and funeral.
- Think about ways your child can say "good-bye" to the person who has died.
- Talk to your child about God, if appropriate, and what happens to people after they die. It is a time to teach your child the religious beliefs you want to install in him or her.
- Watch out for "bad dreams". Are they occurring often? Talk about the dreams or even draw a picture of them.
- Watch for behavioral changes in your child both at home and at school.
- You might see some of the following emotions: tearfulness, irritability, clinging behavior, whiney moods, somatic complaints and an inability to concentrate.
- Talk about memories, good ones and ones not so good.
- Invite your child to come back to you if he or she has more questions or has heard rumors – and you will help get the correct information. Friends, family, schoolmates and others frequently find solace and comfort in doing something in the name of the person who died – particular rituals or a memorial.

What happens to the Person who died?

Explaining about a Funeral

“Of course, our children shouldn’t go to the funeral. They’re much too young.”

The funeral is a rite of separation – the bad dream is indeed real. The presence of the casket actualizes the parting experience, transforming the process of denial to an acceptance of reality. It is an opportunity to say good-bye. The one who dies will no longer be part of the familiar environment.

Yes, the funeral may be sad. But sadness is an integral part of the life cycle. Mental health is not the denial of tragedy, but the frank acknowledgment of it.

Youngsters cannot and should not be spared knowledge about death. When death occurs within or close to a family, no amount of caution and secrecy can hide from the children the feeling that something important and threatening has occurred. They cannot avoid being affected by the atmosphere of grief and solemnity. All the emotional reactions that youngsters are likely to have to a death in the family – sorrow and loneliness, anger and rejection, guilt, anxiety about the future, and the conviction that nothing is certain or stable any more – may be considerably lessened if they feel that they know what is going on and that you are not trying to hide things from them.

You might ask, “Do you think the children should attend the funeral service? They loved her very dearly. But I’m afraid that if they go, they will become disturbed. Wouldn’t it be much better if they stayed with a friend on the day of the funeral?”

You may expect an affirmative reply, for you intend it as a kindness when you shield them from death. Yet recognized authorities have come to the conclusion that not only it is correct to permit children to attend a funeral, but that if they are old enough to go to church or synagogue, can understand what is taking place, and are able to sit through the service, they should be offered the opportunity of *participating* in a ceremony of farewell for the loved one.

Unfortunately, many adults project their own unresolved grief unto their children. For youngsters the funeral is not necessarily bizarre and strange. A child accepts the funeral rites as a natural way of paying respect. After all, death is no stranger. In school, they participate in the burial of a hamster. They witness the funerals of notables during television news programs. Children love pageantry. What is a funeral but a family ceremony?

The importance of the funeral ritual is dramatically portrayed in the French film *Forbidden Games*. A girl’s parents are killed in an air raid. Thereafter she derives comfort from constantly playing “the game of funeral,” giving a dead creature an elaborate interment with casket and flowers. Her game helps her to relieve, digest, and ultimately master the shock of her parents’ death.

Being denied the opportunity to say good-bye may harm even older children. Sometimes children away from home cannot be contacted for a parent’s or grandparent’s funeral. I have noticed time and again in such situations that these young people deny the reality of death when they return home. They were not given the opportunity of saying good-bye. That’s why I recommend that older children come to the cemetery for a private service of farewell. Incompleted grief contributes to emotional illness. Therapists suggest that mourning rituals help initiate and catalyze hidden and unresolved grief problems.

You need not wait for an actual death before you explain the meaning of a funeral. In my own synagogue, a funeral director is invited to explain how a funeral *may* be conducted. (I emphasize the word *may* because each funeral is different, expressing the needs of individual family members.)

Explain the purpose of the funeral and how it touches people on different levels. For religious event; it is much more than the practical and legal disposing of a human body. *A funeral is for the entire community to confer group strength.* You are not alone: one touch of sorrow makes the whole world kin. You are helped from the disorganized state of shock and guilt and grief through the valley of shadow. Your loved one has died, but friends and family still remain.

Discuss with your children what they might expect at the funeral. Explain that it will take place at a funeral home or church or synagogue. The clergyperson will read appropriate prayers. Perhaps the minister will talk about how the person who died touched our lives. The discussion of things that counted in the loved one's life will be brought out in word and song and ritual. Point out that it can be a strengthening and sharing experience for the entire family.

People may cry. But, as we said, what's wrong with that? It's all right. It is one of our ways showing how much we miss that person and wish to have him or her back. A purpose of the funeral is to provide a way for expressing grief.

When your youngsters understand what is occurring, they may be more relaxed about the unfolding events. It is easier for them to understand being *included* than *excluded*, and they are far better off observing the funerals than living with fantasies conjured up by young and fertile imaginations.

It is difficult to determine whether youngsters should be encouraged to attend a funeral. Smaller children could disrupt the service. If they do attend, familiar adults should sit with them near the aisle, and be prepared to leave if necessary. Allow those older children to decide whether they wish to attend.

Very often it is the parents who unconsciously make up the children's minds, saying, "You don't want to go, do you? The decision is made not only in words but by the tone of voice. After hearing what they may expect at the ceremony, youngsters may change their minds many times. If the judgment is not to attend, do not place any shaming pressure upon them. You may certainly suggest that perhaps later you may visit the cemetery together.

Don't arbitrarily send children to stay with friends or relatives. They might construe the dismissal as another kind of abandonment or rejection. Let them know that, if they desire, you would be pleased to have them with you. Their presence could be a comfort at difficult time. Some enlightened adults have helped youngsters feel that they have an important role to play by asking them to answer the doorbell and telephone. They are given the opportunity to mingle with the family and feel needed.

Just as your children cannot be spared knowledge about death, they cannot and should not be excluded from the grief and mourning following death. They too have both a right and a need to say good-bye.

What happens after the Funeral

A child asks her father as they drive by a cemetery, "Daddy, what's that place we're passing?"
"You're too young to understand. I'll explain it to you when you're older."

Usually, the first question a child asks when someone dies is, "Where is she now?" Those with a religious orientation can state their belief, but there is another answer that many can give: a factual one. You

could say, "When she died her body was placed in a casket and buried in the earth. A stone or plaque will show where she is buried. People can come to the grave to say a prayer or just to think about the person."

Of course, not all people are buried in the earth. Some are put above the ground in a mausoleum, a building with spaces cut in the wall for crypts or vaults for the casket. And for still others, the body is burned in a place called a crematory. The ashes may be placed in a small box or urn. Or the ashes can be scattered over the ground or the ocean. Above ground, the box or urn is deposited in a space in the wall of a building called a "columbarium." These technical terms, however, are unimportant. What is significant is your honest, informative answers to their question.

Don't wait until a person dies before you visit a cemetery. When you drive by a burial ground and your child asks, "What is that?" you might stop to walk through together. It is not really so traumatic for the youngster. Mystery is finally removed; shadowy ghosts are replaced by real understanding. If children do not attend the interment service, they may come to the cemetery later with their family. This is advisable when a child cannot accept the reality of death. One boy was told that his mother "went on a journey." Thereafter he became sullen and unmanageable. Whenever his mother's name was mentioned, the child would speak of her in vile language. Then finally one day the child was told the truth. He was taken to the cemetery where he could visit the grave. The child was heartbroken, for he now realized that she had really died. Yet he also felt comforted, for he knew what had happened. And most important, he knew that his mother had not run away and abandoned him.

A funeral does not end in the funeral home or church or synagogue. Its logical conclusion is the grave, the mausoleum, or the columbarium where the loved one is placed. This is where the person is buried.

Talking about death

Kids need to learn that it's part of life

by Mary Jo Kochakian

You don't want to, but you have to. Get ready to talk about it: death

You have to explain to your children that they will die, that you will die, that life is a continuous process of loss and change.

Hard enough for grown-ups to accept. Why share all that depressing stuff with children? But it doesn't have to be all gloom and doom, according to Peter Lynch, a New Haven, Conn., therapist who specializes in helping children deal with death.

"In confronting loss, we're also confronting life. In confronting the two together, I think we're increasing the richness of life," he said.

Part of the problem is cultural. Americans, more than many others, are frightened by death and try to isolate themselves from it, said Lynch, who learned a very different way of dealing with death during his Irish boyhood.

It was certainly nothing traumatic, or even strange, Lynch recalled, to see a body laid out in the church before a funeral. It was typical for family members to die at home.

In the United States, the family is often removed from handling a death. We "subcontract," he said, when we hire a funeral director.

In some groups – Lynch cited traditional Jewish families – the old rituals continue. But after families immigrated to America, the old mourning rituals were often lost. White, modern America, he said, was built on "a sense that life begins here – rebirth. Death was Old World."

Because their parents are so uncomfortable with death, children are likely to see it as a terrifying event for which there is no adequate way to cope.

"They see their parents floundering," Lynch said. "(The parents) have to make decisions: Should I go to work? Should I send the children to school or not? We have to ask about everything because the culture isn't giving any sort of prescriptions."

Exposure to television leads children to associate death with shootings, drunken driving, AIDS and other societal problems, he said. "It's true death also happens because bodies aren't made to live forever. We need to undo some of that society gives."

He advised parents to teach children at a very early age to be aware of the cycles, as well as giving them straightforward information. (Don't use "He's gone to sleep" or other frightening euphemisms.)

When children play in the fallen leaves of autumn, point out that the play resulted from a change. Note changes in toys that wear out, the way rotted leaves give way to snow, and then to crocuses in spring. Older children see their bodies change – a gain, but a loss of childhood, too.

TV news often reports on funerals, an opportunity for parents to talk more directly about death. Children should be introduced to the concept of death at age 3 or 4 he said. "If you introduced death at that age, it won't be such a big deal."

Both very young children and teen-agers are open to talking about death, he said. "Adolescents want to talk about the emotional piece of it. We miss that a lot," he said. Teen suicide "is nearly always about trying to reach inside to understand about death." It's the same thing with bouts of experimentation with drugs or drink – "a way of being dead and coming back to life again," he said.

Children from 5 to 9 years old "need to have their questions answered and need to know they can ask the questions." Children ages 9 to 12 are often "obnoxious" about the topic of death. They deal

with their fear by becoming tough talkers and playing with symbols of death and decay. If they ask about death, they “ask things in a rough way.”

Look at the themes of loss and change in movies children see and books they read, Lynch said. For example, a child who has just seen the film “Batman” will surely be affected by seeing young Bruce Wayne’s parents gunned down. You could say, “That must have been pretty weird or scary.”

All these efforts won’t make the death of a loved one easy. But by claiming death as a part of life, Lynch said, it will make it easier to accept and more meaningful.

‘People are like balloons...’ an analogy for explaining death to children

by Tracey Brown, Dip Psych Counselor and Trainer, Norwich, UK

Some months ago, I came across the following letter written by Alison Howarth, a primary school teacher who is also a funeral director, describing some ideas she has developed through counseling young children after a death.

‘Children relate easily to concepts they themselves have had experience of, and so liken life to a balloon. This is well within the experience of most children. When people are first born they are like a new balloon – the form is there but there is no substance inside the balloon.

As a person grows they become bigger and become bigger and become ‘filled’ with all the things that go to make up that person –learning, intelligence, relationships, etc. This is just the same as a balloon growing when it begins to fill up with air.

As the person begins to age they become a little more wrinkled and have less energy (like a balloon which slowly begins to deflate). At the end of life, when the person dies, it can be likened to all the air being let out of the balloon. Nobody knows where the air has gone, it may be all around us; we may breathe some in but you can’t see it any more. All that is left of the balloon is a wrinkled shell with nothing inside it.

To explain a sudden death it can be likened to a balloon bursting, for no apparent reason, whilst it was partly or fully inflated. Sometimes it happens by accident because the balloon has caught on a sharp object and sometimes it happens because there is a fault in the make-up of the balloon...’

I have since used Alison Howarth’s ideas in my work with several bereaved children, aged between five and nine. They have readily understood and accepted the analogy, finding it helpful in coming to terms with death. One child drew pictures of a balloon person gradually deflating, then drew a box around the deflated balloon and finally colored it over. In this way the child, who had not attended the funeral, created a way to talk about a death and say goodbye.

The description of the balloon being first expanded by all the things that go to make up a person, and then deflated or burst in death, with nothing left but an empty, wrinkled skin, is particularly useful. It helps children to understand that when someone dies the ‘person’ or ‘soul’ is no longer inside, or a part of, the now redundant body, and that it is the empty body which is being buried or cremated,

not the person. It can be helpful to talk with a child about where the 'air' inside the balloon might have gone, but I would hesitate to include the idea of breathing in this air, as it may leave a child with more difficult ideas to understand and make sense of, and it could be upsetting.

The analogy can also be extended to cover other causes of death, for example, illness, where the balloon has something wrong with it which prevents it becoming, or staying, fully inflated so that it deflates before its time – in some cases quite quickly, in others more gradually. Balloons can also be burst by other people, accidentally or intentionally, so this can help to explain deaths in which another person was responsible (such as murder).

Bereaved adult clients who were having difficulties talking to their children about death, have also found these ideas helpful and enabling. I have introduced them to teachers in workshops on bereavement and many, particularly those working in primary schools, thought they would be useful when trying to explain death in the classroom. Older children may not find the analogy quite as useful. My 13-year-old daughter's comment was 'It's a good idea, but sometimes if you're careful you can untie the balloon and blow it up again.'

How can I help a grieving child?

How do I tell a child about a death?

Inform the child as soon as possible, so he is sure to find out from you rather than others. Explain clearly, simply, and honestly what caused the death. Do not lie to the child. Avoid euphemisms. ("He went to sleep and won't wake up"). Use language the child can understand ("She was very, very sick and the doctors couldn't make her any better. Her Body stopped working." "She can't breath anymore or eat or walk or talk, etc.").

Should the child attend the funeral and wake?

Include the child as soon as possible. Tell the child what to expect. ("Lots of people will be crying. The body will be in the casket"). Encourage the child to help in planning. (Select a passage to be read or a piece of music. Write a letter of find a memento place in the casket). Allow the child to invite teachers and friends. If possible, arrange to have a close relative or friend be there with the child throughout the ceremonies to explain, comfort and leave early with the child if necessary.

What should I do? What can I expect?

Don't try to prevent the child from grieving. Grief is a normal and necessary process which should not be blocked. Each individual has her own way of grieving and this should be respected. Don't have set expectations or a time limit on a person's grieving process. ("Your brother died over a month ago. It's time you forgot about him and stopped wearing his shirt.")

What if I cry in front of him?

Embrace the child and cry with him. Your displays of emotion signal to children that they have the freedom to be open and honest with their feelings and actions.

What can I do to make things go more smoothly in the household?

Try to spend more time with each child, and perhaps set up a regular family conference or gathering time each week. Allow each child to choose what they want to do to help around the house, and consider getting outside help for a while to ease the burden. Put off big changes, but involve the child in decision as much as possible. (“Who should take over the empty room?”)

My child has temper tantrums and don’t know how to handle him.

Tell the child that it is normal to have feelings of anger, guilt, vulnerability, frustration, etc. Feelings are a normal part of being human and we do better if we can recognize our feelings and not try to hide them. Model for the child different ways of expressing feelings. (Punching a pillow or hammering pegs when angry, screaming really loud when frustrated, keeping a journal, etc.)

How can I know what is troubling her?

Listen carefully to what the child is saying. Concerns can become overblown in a child’s mind if they are not addressed. (“Who would take care of me if you were to die?” “If Johnny died in the hospital won’t Susie die when she gets her tonsils out?”)

How can I get my child to talk about it?

Encourage communication but don’t force it. By talking about your feelings and memories you can give a child the word to use to express himself. (“I remember when your sister would sing that silly song really loud... do you remember anything else will about her?”)

Reading a book together can sometimes help. There are many books available now about death, dying, and grief. Check with your local library, bookstore or visit www.jenniferallenbooks.com

What can I do if my child just doesn’t want to talk with me about the death?

Often it is difficult for children to talk to their parent about a death in the family. They may want to avoid making their parents cry again, or they may be ashamed of feelings or actions they need to admit. A close friend, relative, school counselor, teacher, neighbor, or pastor may be just the listener that is needed. If the child seems dangerously depressed, then seek out professional counseling, preferably someone who has experience and is good with grieving children.

My child seems so “bottles up”, and she has always been very quiet

Music or art lessons or classes in karate, wrestling, etc. can help a child regain lost self-esteem and a sense of personal strength. Often a child may feel very helpless after a death in his family, and anything which makes him feel more confident is good. Just supplying the materials for arts and crafts or maybe some puppets might be a big help.

What can relatives or friends do to help out?

Make arrangements for the child to visit the cemetery or mausoleum with a close family friend when he would like to go on his own. Find ways to help around the house to make things easier on the family. (Don't say, "If there's anything I can do, just call." Think of something specific and ask if you can do it.)

My child is so different now

People who have experienced a death undergo tremendous change and change is difficult in any circumstance. Let the new self-emerge slowly and give children the support and help they need. (Sometimes a grieving child will change his crowd of friends, or behave quite differently than before the death. Also a child may change his appearance drastically and show a very different attitude.)

School was never a Problem before!

School can be a source of additional stress to the grieving child. Work along with your child to create an understanding with the teacher(s) and others at the school. Set up plans to help the child deal with concentration difficulties, troubles with classmates, or especially rough days. (It can be very helpful to allow the child to take a day or an afternoon off once in a while when she is feeling unable to cope. A safe haven in the school could be a corner in the library or a counselor's office.)

What will the future bring?

Children seem to deal with bits and pieces of the reality as they mature. For instance, when an adolescent starts dating, she may realize that her father won't be at her wedding. When a young child repeats for months the question "When will Mommy come back?" he is attempting to understand the finality of the death.

Age	Developmental Stage/Task	Concept of death	Grief response	Signs of distress	Possible interventions
2-4	Egocentric. Believe world centers around them. Narcissistic. No cognitive understanding. Pre-conceptual; unable to grasp concepts.	Seen as abandonment. Seen as reversible, not permanent. Common statements: "Did you know my daddy died? When will he be home?"	Intensive response but brief. Very present oriented. Most aware of altered patterns of care. Repeated questions.	Regression: changes in eating and sleeping patterns, bedwetting, general irritability and confusion.	Short and honest interactions, frequent repetition, comforting, reassurance, nurturing. Consistent routine.
4-7	Gaining sense of autonomy. Exploring world outside of self. Gaining language. Fantasy thinking and wishing. Initiative phase seeing self as initiator. Concerns of guilt.	Death still seen as reversible. Great personification of death. Feeling of responsibility because of wishes and thoughts. Common statements: "It's my fault. I was mad at her and wished she'd die."	Verbalization. Great concern with process. How? Why? Repetitive questioning. May act as though has happened. General distress and confusion.	Regression: nightmares, sleeping and eating disturbances. Violent play. Attempts to take on role of person who died.	Symbolic play using drawings and stories. Allow and encourage expression of energy and feelings through physical outlets. Talk about it.
7-11	Concrete thinking. Self-confidence develops. Beginning of socialization. Development of cognitive agility. Beginning of logical thinking.	Death as punishment. Fear of bodily harm and mutilation. This is a difficult transition period, still wanting to see death as reversible but beginning to see it as final.	Specific questioning. Desire for complete detail. Concerned with how others are responding. What is the right way? How should they be responding? Starting to have ability to mourn and understand mourning.	Regression: problems in school, withdrawal from friends. Acting out. Sleeping and eating disturbances. Overwhelming concern with body. Suicidal thoughts (desire to join one who died). Role confusion.	Answer questions. Encourage expression of range of feelings. Encourage and allow control. Be available but allow alone time. Symbolic play. Allow for physical outlets. TALK ABOUT IT!
11-18	Formal operational problem solving. Abstract thinking. Integration of one's own personality	"ADULT" approach. Ability to abstract. Beginning to truly conceptualize death. Work at making sense of teachings.	Depression. Denial. Repression. More often willing to talk to people outside the family. Traditional mourning.	Depression. Anger. Anger towards parents. Non-compliance. Rejection of former teaching. Role confusing acting out.	Encourage verbalization. Do not take control. Encourage self-motivation. Listen. Be available. Do not attempt to take grief away.

Six things Kids can do!

1. Learn that the death of their loved one is real. Talk about it, and share how that feels, what it means, how it happened
2. Feel the feelings, knowing that there are caring, loving adults to be here helping you.
3. Turn our thoughts about the person who died, into memories.
4. Come to understand myself and how I fit into my family now that my loved one has died. Who will take over the things they used to do? What is my responsibility?
5. Gain an understanding about the death. How it happened, why, what is death, what are my beliefs about living and dying, what are my spiritual beliefs?
6. Continue to feel supported by loving, caring adults that understand my loss throughout my childhood and adolescence.

Myths about grief

All losses are the same

Normal grief lasts only a short time

All people grieve the same way

Time heals grief

You get only as much grief as you can handle

Grief can be resolved

Too much grief is a sign that you are going crazy

Children grieve the same as adults

Children do not grieve

Family members are the “best” helpers

To express deep feelings is to lose control

You have no right to be angry

You have no reason to be angry with the...

doctors

family members

deceased

lawyers

police, or courts

Reaction to sudden death and anticipated death are the same

You can avoid pain and still resolve your grief.



Tear Soup Cooking Tips

Reprinted from
TearSoup, a recipe for healing after loss

If A Child Is The Cook

- Be honest with the child and give simple, clear explanations consistent with the child's level of understanding. Be careful not to overload them with too many facts. This information may need to be repeated many times.
- Prepare the child for what they can expect in a new situation such as, going to a memorial service, or viewing the body. Explain as best you can how others may be reacting and how you would like the child to behave.
- When considering if a child should attend a memorial service consult the child. Their wishes should be the main factor for the decision. Include the child in gatherings at whatever level they want to participate. Helping to make cookies for the reception may be all they want to do.
- Expect them to ask questions like, "Why does he have his glasses on if he's dead and can't read?" Or, "Why is her skin cold?"
- Younger children are more affected by disruptions in their environment than by the loss itself.
- Avoid confusing explanations of death, such as, "gone away", or "gone to sleep." It might be better to say, "his body stopped working."
- Avoid making God responsible for the death. Instead say, "God didn't take your sister, but God welcomed her." Or, "God is sad that we're sad. But now that your sister has died, she is with God."
- Don't assume that if the child isn't talking about the loss it hasn't affected them.
- Be consistent and maintain the usual routines as much as possible.
- Encourage the child to express their feelings and to ask questions.
- Children may act out their grief in their fantasy play and artwork.
- If children have seen adults cry in the past they will be less concerned about tears now.
- Show affection and let them know that they are loved and will be taken care of.
- Each child reacts differently to loss. Behaviors that you may observe include: withdrawal, acting out, disturbances in sleeping and eating, poor concentration, being overly clingy, regression to earlier stages of development, taking on attributes of the deceased.
- Sharing your grief with a child is a way to help them learn about grief.