



# WinterSpring

*Facing Loss, Embracing Life Again -- Together*

PO Box 8169, Medford, OR 97501

541-552-0621 winterspring.org

## HOW TO HELP YOUR GRIEVING CHILD

*"...anything human is mentionable, and anything mentionable can be manageable." ~ Mr. Rogers*

### **What do children need?**

- **Honesty from you**—When you talk with your children, the truth is always best. Keep it simple, using language they can understand. It's natural to want to protect them from pain, but ultimately, we can't always do this. Avoid euphemisms, such as "He went to sleep and won't wake up," or "She passed on." Children are very literal, so don't give them words they have to try to interpret. Say, "She was very sick and her body stopped working," or "He can't breathe, or walk or talk anymore." Remember that they may learn about a death somewhere else and the information may also not be correct. You will establish trust when you tell them the truth in a timely manner.
- **An opportunity to share their thoughts**—ask them what they know or think about death as a starting point. Let them talk about what's in their heads. Also, some children won't talk. If you share with them, this may help them to find words.
- **Your complete attention when you are with them**—Listen and listen some more. Children need attention when there has been a death. This might include attention to what they are doing during play, because that's often how they work their feelings through. Reflect back to them what you see them doing, without judgment or trying to direct the play. Make space for them so they feel a strong connection to you. Reflect back to them using their own words.
- **To see you cry, too**—embrace your children and cry with them. Your emotional expression will signal to children that they have the freedom to feel what they feel.
- **To ask questions**—they will have questions as they try to make sense of a death. Answer as honestly as you can, using age-appropriate language. Concerns may become overblown in a child's mind if not addressed.
- **Validation of their feelings**—children will feel many of the same things adults feel. Grief is more than sadness and crying. They may experience anger, frustration, guilt, vulnerability. They may feel responsible for the death. All of these emotions are normal. Give them the freedom to express their feelings. Listen and reflect back to them what you hear. Correct any misconceptions. Help them find safe ways to express difficult emotions, such as artwork, popping balloons, punching a pillow on the bed, or swinging a foam snake against an outdoor chair or table. What they are experiencing is normal—let them know this.
- **Acceptance that children grieve differently than adults**—children grieve through play. And they grieve in small doses so you might see them upset for a few minutes and then later laughing and playing like nothing happened. Just like adults, everyone grieves in their own way. Each of your children will do this differently.
- **Alternative ways to express grief if they don't want to talk**—some children won't want to talk. Instead of trying to force them, provide different ways to express their grief--art materials, puppets, mats to wrestle on, an altar to the person who died in the corner of a room where they can place things on their own.
- **Set limits, make rules and create routines**—children feel safe when they have clear boundaries. It's easy to slack off when there's been a death, but this actually creates more chaos for the children. Do your best to enforce these boundaries, but also be flexible enough that if they need some special attention.

- **Healthy eating, sleeping, and exercise habits**—for all of us, our bodies are grieving, too. Eating right, drinking lots of water, and getting exercise help stabilize emotions. Making healthy options available for your children can help them get through this difficult time. Appetite may change during this time, which is normal.
- **Special attention at bedtime**—fears can come up at nighttime. Your children may have difficulty falling asleep, or staying asleep. Establishing special routines, such as a special book, a song, or prayers can help calm them down. Help them to feel safe by staying with them until they are asleep.
- **Ways to remember**—snuggle up with them and look at pictures together. Talk about special memories. Create an altar or set up a basket where they can place things of meaning. Have a pencil and little pieces of paper for them to write things for the basket. (This is especially useful for children who don't like to verbalize feelings.)
- **To know they are not alone in their grief**—you can provide this by letting them know you are grieving too. You may also choose to find a children's support group. Knowing there are other children who are also grieving can be very reassuring to them.
- **Your patience**—just like you will have good days and bad days, so do children after a death. Be patient as they go through this difficult time.
- **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND DO YOUR OWN GRIEVING**— How you deal with your own grief will impact how present you are with your children. Adults are the role models for children. If they see grieving in healthy ways, they will learn from you. If you are having a particularly difficult time, tell your children how you are feeling...and plan ahead to have a trusted family member or friend sit with you and care for your children when you need it.

### ***What else do you need to know about children?***

- **Some children's behavior will become younger**. For example, a child might start to have potty accidents. This is one way they express their grief and signal that they need attention. Be supportive and understanding. Longer periods of such behavior may require professional help.
- **Some children may become little adults**. They may want to protect you from your pain by keeping you from worrying about them, or they may work hard to not be a burden to you. Encourage your children to still be children.
- **Everyone grieves differently**, and there is not particular time period in which their grief will end. They will also go through grieving as they reach different levels of cognitive development.
- **Children will hear things**. People talk. Check in with your kids and clarify misconceptions.
- **Seek additional help** for your children if their grief experience disrupts their ability to function over a longer period of time, such as six months. Look for persistent: loss of interest in activities they used to love, unusual/repetitive strange behaviors, appetite increases or decreases, sleep disturbances, headaches, stomach aches, fatigue or loss of energy, suicidal talk, obsession with death, difficulty concentrating, or social withdrawal.

### ***How do words impact children?***

- **Children take our words very literally**. Most important is our genuine compassion as we speak.
- **Do say**, "I don't know what to say that will help, but I am here to care for you." Do say, "This must be very difficult for you and I'm here with you."
- **Don't say**, "I'm sorry." Don't say, "Your loved one is in a better place." Don't say, "Now you have to be the man (or woman) of the family." Don't say, "I know how you feel." Don't say, "You were lucky to have your loved one for as long as you did." Don't say, "You'll get over it soon."