

When Your Child Faces Grief: Information for Concerned Parents



It is rewarding for us to see our children growing, changing, facing new challenges and navigating their way through them. It is also very difficult for us, as parents, to witness some of their more difficult moments – frustration in academics or sports, the first time they encounter difficulties with their peers, the first (or 15th) broken heart, anxiety over test performance. There are so many passages, happy and sad ones, which children traverse to grow into complete, resilient human beings and so many junctures at which they need our understanding and guidance.

Our children's early encounters with grief and loss are very significant. How a child deals with this experience may establish a pattern in his or her life – a map for how the child will persevere through and accommodate difficulties, how he or she will respond to their own needs as they grieve and how they will respond to others, as well.

Grief is the process that follows significant loss. Grief is not one feeling or emotion, but rather a complicated mix of emotions that each serve to move the individual through a healing process that results in adjustment and accommodation to the loss. **Many different experiences can propel children into the grieving process:**

- Death
- Divorce
- Moving/immigration
- Diagnosis of a chronic illness or injury for themselves or someone they care about
- Diagnosis of a learning disability or special need
- Social or peer issues

While we know that children are deeply affected by the loss of a loved one, they sometimes react to learning of the death of a person that they do not know very well or may not know at all, particularly when the death occurs in the school, neighborhood or faith community. Their reactions may be especially strong if the person who died is young or the parent or sibling of a classmate or friend. While children may understand intellectually that all people can die (and ultimately will), the reality of the death of a young person, a friend's parent or a teacher can be very unsettling.

There are signs and symptoms that a child may be experiencing grief:

- Sleep disturbances – having difficulty falling asleep or waking during the night
- Little appetite or difficulty finishing meals
- Attention span issues and inability to focus or concentrate
- Reluctance or inability to work independently
- Fretfulness and dependent or regressive behavior – using “baby-ish” vocabulary, thumb-sucking, toileting issues, reluctance to self-care (washing or dressing)

- Hyperactivity
- Irritability
- Separation anxiety – reluctance to be separated from parents

It is important to **watch for changes** in your child’s affect (general disposition) or behavior, as these are the most significant indicators that a child is struggling. Children may have a lot of questions about how a death occurred, why it happened, and what happens now, especially to the body. **It is best to answer questions honestly**, with a level of detail that responds to the question the child actually asked. It is generally true that a child needs an answer to any question he or she is capable of asking and that answering the question (and not expanding on it until the child asks for more detail or information) will help alleviate anxiety. Children often ask questions repeatedly and we may be convinced the child doesn’t understand our responses – but that is often not the case. Sometimes young children ask questions over and over to test whether or not the answer will remain the same. Understanding such big concepts is not easy and children need time to absorb the information we provide for them. **Understanding is a process of learning and incorporating information, accomplished over a period of time.**

There are important things that parents can do to help children through the experience of early grief. The first is to **pay attention to their concerns and questions**. Attempting to distract a child from these issues only raises their anxiety or sends the message that such issues are not to be talked about, and neither outcome is helpful. If we see our children struggling, we may have to approach the subject and demonstrate for them that talking about difficult, frightening or sad things is a good way to deal with tough issues. The second thing we can do is to **respond compassionately**, recognizing that this is not the time for new challenges or strict adherence to all the rules. We maintain the structure of their everyday lives and schedules but also watch carefully for signs that they are not managing as well as they usually do. If that’s the case, we can provide support – cuddling, talking, smaller meals more often, extra reading at bedtime, making sure there is some playtime or “downtime” in their schedules.

When we talk to our children openly and honestly, answer their questions and treat them with compassion and understanding they will navigate through their early experience of grief. They will begin to develop their own “map” for moving through the many life experiences that are grief journeys. They will know what to do for themselves and how to do for others as well. They will become resilient, able to persevere through loss. In the words of Helen Keller, America’s first champion of and from the special needs population,

*Although the world is full of suffering,
it is also full of the overcoming of it.*

If you would like more information or assistance, please contact
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