Responding to Children in Grief

Prairie View grief and trauma specialist explains how to help children after a death

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Death and dying can be scary experiences for children. Because of death's many uncertainties and unknowns, children find it both fascinating and frightening when it happens to a loved one.

My father was diagnosed with cancer when I was eight years old and, after years of health struggles, he died when I was 14. My experiences with my own grief have helped to inform my approach to working with children at Prairie View. In my years as a clinician here, I have had the honor of journeying with several families as they have lost parents, grandparents, siblings and friends.

During grief children need support. Grief is a different experience for everyone, but for all of us, it can be life changing and overwhelming. Children need help and support from loving adults to figure out how to navigate these emotions.

Grief has been described as a wave, which seems a very fitting image. The death of a loved one is like the tidal wave that knocks you off your feet and puts the whole world upside down. It takes awhile, but eventually you come up for air and get above the water and start to see the shoreline again. But then little waves of grief keep coming. They grab us at predictable times like special celebrations or anniversaries. But other times the waves hit unexpectedly, like when we hear a certain song or when we smell the cookies grandma used to make. While the initial impact of grief feels overwhelming, over time the waves still come but the impact is not as strong, and healing begins to take place.

For parents or caregivers, figuring out how to help a child move through that grief process can be very confusing. The questions I hear most often from parents are "How do I prepare my child for an expected death?" or "What do I say since the death has happened."

One of the greatest gifts my parents gave to me with my father's illness was their preparation for the future. Since he had chronic health issues, they knew that death was a possibility. Shortly after his diagnosis, they spent a weekend away from home, and they both wrote letters to my brother and me for all the big events in our lives that they might not live to see.

When my father died, he left me letters for my eighth grade graduation, my high school graduation, my college graduation and my wedding day. While he was not present in person for those events, his writings gifted his wishes to me for those very special occasions. Using this example, I have encouraged parents I work with to do the same when they know they have a terminal illness.

When death is not predicted or known but sudden or accidental, this kind of preparation is not possible. Parents who survive may be in their own tailspin of emotions as they too react to the death of the loved one. Children going through grief need reassurance of their own safety and that of their loved ones.

Children need one-on-one time from parents. Death shakes the child's security. Parents can help with this by putting away their electronics and setting aside time each day to snuggle with or talk with their child. Children need permission to talk about the loved one, to bring up their questions about death and to know that their surviving loved ones care about them. If you as a parent are unable to provide that time (perhaps due to your own grief), ask a family member or close friend to spend special time with that child.

Children need structure and routine. In the midst of reacting to the death, predictability and consistency help the child to feel safe and stable. Parents need to be sure to be on time to pick up their children from events — arriving late can cause increased anxiety about the safety of a loved one. Keeping the child involved with normal activities helps the child to have a rhythm to life again.

Children need a chance to say goodbye. If it is possible before the death to allow the child to talk to the loved one, even if by phone or online, try to arrange this as it helps the child to have closure. If a death is sudden and there is no chance for this, allow the child to draw or write a letter to the loved one. Follow your child's lead with how to say this goodbye and do not judge the feelings written to the loved one, but allow the child full expression.

Children need to be included in planning for special times. Ask your child or children about how they want to celebrate holidays and birthdays. Some family traditions may be important to continue even without the loved one. Other times children may need a new tradition to be created. Parents need to be physically and emotionally present at these difficult times.

Consider these ideas to help children grieve. There are many ways to help children grieve. Consider these suggestions from my clinical practice:
— Create a blanket using clothing from the loved one.
— Make handprints while a sick loved one is still alive. Write memories of the loved one in the handprint.
— Take a photo of the child and the loved one. Frame it with extra matting, and write or draw memories around the photo.
— Create a stuffed animal using clothing from a loved one.
— Pick a song with the child to help him/her remember the loved one. Allow the child to play the song when missing the person.
— Offer art supplies so the child can create a symbol to remember the loved one.

If grief continues, find a professional. When given support to express their feelings, children are usually very resilient. If, as a caregiver, you see signs of concern that the

grief is significantly affecting the child in school or home life, consider making an appointment with a mental health professional familiar with grief. Sometimes children need an adult outside the family to express the mixed emotions of sadness, anger, denial and guilt that can come with a death.

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