

## Being there for grieving children

As early educators and caregivers it is often the permanent losses children face, such as death or traumatic loss that challenges our practice – what are we to do? What are we to say? What do children really understand about death? Death stops us in our tracks and reminds us of how little our background in education (and life) prepares us for understanding and responding to the children we care for. Although we are not experts (nor expected to be), there are things to think about in supporting children who have experienced death and loss.

Children need to be involved in an honest, reassured, developmentally appropriate way. As we carefully listen and observe, children will teach us about their grief and what they understand about death, which is very different from adults. Young children have short attention spans and also short emotional attention spans. Because young children do not have the capacity to understand time, they do not understand the permanence of death and don't 'hold' emotional thoughts for long periods of time. They may say, "My dad died" and then run off to play with friends. As Katie O'Neil, Family/Child Advocate states, "It's why children are so buoyant and so delightful to be with. They can be sad one minute and happy and laughing the next."

Death, grief and mourning transform all of us. You can't change the loss, but you can help children facilitate the way loss is experienced. Protecting our children means that we will love them, hear them, and introduce them to positive ways to explore life, death, and grief, not avoid or deny it, which is unhealthy.



All children need to talk about and explore all aspects of life, including death. What we share with children needs to be truthful, brief, and something they will understand. Invite children to ask questions and remind them they can come to the adults and get a hug anytime they need. It is equally important to offer reassurance

when responding to challenging questions. For example, a child experiencing a death might ask, "Are you going to die, too?" A response might be, "I know something very sad happened – our friend Donna died. Most people live a long, long time, but anyone can die. I'm really healthy and plan to live a long time. And I plan to take good care of you."

"Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation." ~ National Association of School Psychologists, 2003.

Caregivers are someone the child and family will need. Caregivers are a professional resource for families. Be prepared to offer families concrete suggestions and to answer questions they might ask. Gather books, articles, and pamphlets from professional programs and bereavement specialists, such as Hospice centers, that can help not only families, but can also refresh and bring new ideas into our practice. If working in a program, talk with the director about what resources and policies there are for helping children and families deal with a death and how the concept of death is explained within the curriculum. If running your own program, review your practices for

when there is death or traumatic loss and review how the life cycle is explored in your curriculum. Maintain good communication with the child's family to better understand their situation.

Take time to tap into your own emotions. One caregiver shared, "I was so sad when a preschool student's father died of cancer. She was only two! She couldn't verbalize or even cognitively understand what was going on around her. At first I wasn't a good support because I became overwhelmed with my own sadness. I really had to process my own feelings about her father's death and revisit how I could best support her, her family, and our program. A local bereavement support program for families gave me a lot of guidance. "

Because of developmental abilities and cognitive limitations, young children do not fully understand death. To support a healthy grief process or what some call 'good grief', children will need to grow in their understanding, grieving, and commemoration of the death. It is not a linear process nor does it happen in predictable stages. Grief and understanding unfold in their own natural way. Although every child is unique, it is not until around age 7 or 8 that most children begin to understand death as permanent and something everyone faces. However, how a child experiences and understands death will depend on his/her developmental ability, personality, religious and spiritual beliefs as well as what he/she has experienced and gathered from others, including family, television, movies, and other outside sources.

In the book *Explaining Death to Children*, Dr. Earl Grollman suggests helping children understand death by explaining it in terms of the absence of a familiar function or functions. For example, when flowers die, they don't bloom anymore, when people are dead, they no longer breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel anymore.

Rituals and commemorations may help work through grief, but should be appropriate and by choice. Children should be well prepared and know what to expect to better participate in rituals such as a funeral. For example, explain that there will be a casket for the body and maybe flowers. People might be sad, laugh and tell stories. The family will decide if the child is ready, but most experts agree that with preparation, children can benefit from rituals and should be given the choice to attend or not.

It's not about fixing the grief or even taking away the pain, but rather it's about being present and mindful of the grief that is uniquely individual to the child. When we see observations that tell us a child is hurting, that is our invitation to make a meaningful connection. We may see displays of sadness, anger, confusion, frustration, regression, and rage. Find ways to let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling and what they need to feel comforted (which they may not even know themselves!) and that you will be available for them. In these types of connections, the child begins to feel safe and begins to heal. As stated on the Tides bereavement program site, "Remember, what you say is not as important as just being there."

## References

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