



HOSPICE MESSAGES OF HOPE

Grief Through the Eyes of a Child

CHILDREN AND GRIEF

In early American history, death was much more familiar to children than it is today. Households were multigenerational and even very young children learned about birth, illness, caregiving and death. With advances in modern medicine, we have seen a decrease in infant and child mortality, as well as prolonged life spans. Many children may not experience or witness the aging and dying of those they love and experience the grief that follows.

Our culture often values perceived notions of “getting over it” or “moving on,” which can make someone feel shameful and inadequate.

Although children may not witness the aging or illness journey, by the time they are in school most will have experienced the loss of a pet, friend, neighbor or relative. Children often are kept busy or ignored by adults who may be grieving themselves or do not have the energy, resources or understanding necessary to support the grieving child.

As a society, we describe children as resilient but fail to recognize that children need compassion, empathy and support just like adult grievers. Resilience can be built and supported by doing the following:

- Assuring them they are in a caring relationship
- Giving them the knowledge to ask for help
- Encouraging self care
- Meeting them where they are at, and not rescuing them
- Trusting and encouraging their ability to cope
- Equipping them with a problem-solving “tool box”
- Allowing them to talk about fears with support
- Playing and using creativity
- Listening and loving

MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND GRIEF

- Children don’t understand death, therefore they don’t grieve. Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve and children hurt less as they understand less.
- Children are not affected by the grief experienced by adults. They can cope more easily if they have lots of activities. Children should be protected and shielded from the pain of grief.
- Childhood bereavement will always lead to a maladjusted adult life or that children are resilient and will “bounce back.” Grief is short term.

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HOW CHILDREN UNDERSTAND DEATH AND GRIEF

Even though children may not talk about death in your presence, they have an awareness of it due to exposure to overheard conversations, television, the internet and books. Ideas about death grow with age, development and experience. Observation of death with plants, insects, birds, pets and people widen that experience.

Birth to toddlers: They may have a visceral response to loss by sensing something amiss in their environment and from those loved ones around them.

Ages 3-5: They do not accept death as a permanent process. They tend more to fear the separation from the person. They may see death as temporary and reversible. Their grief response may be more internal mourning.

Ages 5-9: At this stage, they begin to have an understanding of the permanency of death and the personal impact it has on them. They believe death can be avoided, and may view it as unfair or as their fault. Their grief response may be more internal mourning.

Ages 9-12: They understand death is universal and permanent. They may be fascinated by the macabre and interested in the details of death, and they are more verbal and outward mourning.

Ages 12+: Adolescents have an adult understanding of death, intense emotions and they spend time thinking about death.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR HELPING CHILDREN

When telling a child someone has died, use direct language and avoid euphemisms, such as passed away, sleeping, or on trip. By doing this, the child can start to accept the finality of the situation. Answer questions honestly and as thorough as the child's age and stage of development allow.

Attend to their basic needs, keep their daily routines and their environment the same as much as possible. Be supportive, understanding, open and accepting of behaviors. Listen objectively and allow the child to talk about the death as much as needed. When they are ready to mourn, allowing tears and reminiscing about the lost loved one are necessary for healing.

FUNERAL AND OTHER RITUALS

Rituals are found in every culture throughout history as they enhance the meaning and significance of an event. Rituals surrounding death increase family and community connectedness and allow for emotional and physical expressions that may be too deep for words. Additional rituals to celebrate the life of their loved one can help ease pain.

Children should not be discouraged from attending funerals, memorial services, or burials. Funerals are rituals for saying goodbye and are the opportunity for the first step in mourning – accepting the reality of the loss.

- Ask them to participate in planning the funeral/memorial service, this will increase personal meaning.
- Offer to take them to the visitation, viewing the body will help them accept the death.
- Select different pieces of music and include them in the choice.
- Ask them what words they may want to share during the service.
- Ask them to write a note, draw picture, or choose a toy they may want to place in the casket. Choose a flower for the casket.
- Keep a record, diary or tape of events for them to review as it may help in their healing.

Adapted from "Companionship the Grieving Child," by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

"What Color is Dead?" by Darcie Sims, PhD, CHT, CT, GMS

"I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye," by Brook Noel and Pamela Blair, PhD

FOLLOWING ARE SOME BOOKS ABOUT LOSS AND GRIEVING FOR TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS AS SUGGESTED FROM THE GUARDIAN:

"Goodnight Mister Tom," by Michelle Magorian

"Bridge to Terabithia," by Katherine Paterson

"Goodbye Mog," by Judith Kerr

"No Matter What," by Debi Gliori

"The Velveteen Rabbit," by Margery Williams

"Duck, Death and the Tulip," by Wolf Erlbruch

"A Monster Calls," by Patrick Ness

"Michael Rosen's Sad Book," by Michael Rosen

"The Secret Garden," by Frances Hodgson Burnett

"Taste of Blackberries," Doris Buchanan Smith

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HERE ARE SOME BOOK SUGGESTIONS FOR CHILDREN FROM WHATSYOURGRIEF.COM:

- “Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children ” (age 5+)
- “The Invisible String” (age 3+)
- “I’ll Always Love You” (age 4+)
- “When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death (age 4+)
- “I Miss You: A First Look at Death” (age 4+)
- “The Saddest Time” (age 6-9)
- “Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss” (age 8+)
- “Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying” (age 4+)
- “Where Are You? A Child’s Book About Loss” (age 4-8)
- “Samantha Jane’s Missing Smile: A Story About Coping With the Loss of a Parent” (age 5+)
- “The Scar” (age 5-9)
- “I Wish I Could Hold Your Hand...: A Child’s Guide to Grief and Loss” (age 9+)
- “Water Bugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children” (age 4+)
- “Someone I Love Died” (age 4-8)
- “Finding Grandpa Everywhere: A Young Child Discovers Memories of a Grandparent (age 7+)
- “The Empty Place: A Child’s Guide Through Grief” (age 5-10)
- “The Memory String” (age 4-8)
- “Grief is Like a Snowflake” (age 4+)

OSF Home Care Services is here to support you and wants to meet you wherever you are in your grief journey.

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