

Telling Children and Teens

“What should I tell the children?”

This question is often asked and may be particularly difficult after the suicide of a loved one. The answer for all manner of death is to tell the truth.

Misleading, evading the truth or telling falsehoods to children about death or how the death occurred may be confusing and frightening. A child can easily sense something is wrong and may take on unnecessary guilt. They may hear the truth from someone else then their trust in you could be difficult to regain.

Speak to children at their level of development and answer questions in the same manner. Children need to be reassured that someone will care for them and that they will be safe.

Children and adolescents may have a multitude of feelings happening at the same time or simply may not feel anything at all. Whatever they are feeling, the important thing to remember is that they understand it is OK, that whatever those feelings are, they have permission to feel and let them out. If they want to keep them to themselves for awhile, that's OK too.

How Can I Help Them Cope with Death?

- * Be direct, simple and honest. Explain truthfully what happened.
- * Accept the emotions and reactions the child expresses. Accept how the child or teen does or does not feel.
- * Encourage the child or teen to express feelings openly. Crying is normal and helpful. So are feelings of anger and fear.
- * Offer warmth with your physical presence and affection.
- * Share your feelings with the child and allow the child to comfort you.
- * Reassure the child that death is not contagious. The death of one person does not mean the child or other loved ones will soon die.
- * Maintain order, stability and security in the child's life.
- * Listen to what your child or teen is telling or asking you and then respond accordingly to their level.
- * Allow the child to make decisions about participation in family rituals such as visitation, attending the funeral or socializing after the funeral.
- * Be sure to explain in advance what will happen next.

CHILDREN AND GRIEF

Understanding How a Child Grieves

Children grieve in their own way and according to their own age level.

A child 0-4 years of age focuses on the here and now, but they will sense something is wrong.

A child from 5-8 years is beginning to understand that dead people do not function anymore, but they may use magical and imaginary thinking. (Like Cinderella-If they kiss their mom she will wake up). They may ask where the person is, expecting them to return.

A 9-12 year old child will understand that the dead person will not be back and may consider what an afterlife means.

Teenagers understand the permanence of death but often reject it; they feel invincible; death may shake their world like an earthquake.

Their feelings may include sadness, anger, confusion, anxiety, fear, loneliness.

Physical responses may include: headaches, stomach aches, changes in their sleep pattern, changes in their appetite. School age children may have difficulty concentrating at school; they may feel school is meaningless.

Children process their grief incrementally. They may be sad and crying one minute and happy and playing the next.

Children may reprocess their grief at significant developmental milestones; entering middle school, high school, college. Their first prom dance; their first football game; marriage.

What to Do?

Safety and Security are First. Provide them with a safe environment; with warmth; with comfort; with food and liquid. Hold them; hug them often. Children may be able to begin processing their grief by being part of a funeral service; ie. Putting flowers in or on the casket; participating in a balloon releasing ceremony; remembering the loved one through pictures or stories.

Maintain routine schedules and discipline as much as possible. Children 2-10 years of age process grief through their play. Watch and listen how they play with their toys, dolls, trucks, cars, stuffed animals.

Physical exercise, sports, art, music all help a child work through grief.

What to Say?

Regardless of age, it is important to be honest with them. Use Clear language. (i.e. "Daddy died". "He cannot move or eat or breath anymore and he cannot be with us anymore."). This may bring tears, crying or other grief reactions but it actually is the first step toward their healing from the Grief of their Loss. Tell them they are loved and safe. Older children may be able, with help, to talk about their grief. Ask them to share their thoughts/feelings with you.

Relating to your children in the midst of your own grief.

If you are crying let them know you are sad because your loved one has died. If you are upset, confused, angry do let your children know it is because you miss your loved one too.

Reading Resources

The Colors of Grief: Understanding a Child's Journey through Loss from Birth to Adulthood by Janis A. Di Ciacco PH.D (A book for parents)

When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief by Marge Heegaard (A book for children)