Childhood Grief

Guidelines for Caregivers

As adults, we learn to speak about death through euphemisms and code. Loved ones "pass on" or are "at rest." Words like "dead" feel too blunt and painful. Children, however, have not yet learned this code. When we avoid speaking openly and honestly with kids about death, the gaps in knowledge are filled with their own theories and ideas, many of which are worse than reality.

Use this handout as a guide for speaking with your child about death and helping them cope. Consider their age, developmental level, and needs as you approach this topic.

Talking to Children about Death

Be open to discussion. Blunt conversations about death might seem taboo, but they don't have to be. Bringing up the topic of death, and allowing kids to do the same, gives them permission to ask questions and express their feelings. However, don't force conversation if they are not ready.

Teach children about death. Many kids do not understand that death is permanent. They might wonder how the deceased will eat or drink, or if they feel pain. Explain that when a person dies, their body stops working, and they no longer do these things. Children might need many reminders that the person will not return.

Avoid using euphemisms for death. Kids are likely to misunderstand phrases such as "he passed," "he's gone," or "we lost her." They will want to search for someone who is "lost," and will expect someone who is "gone" to return. Instead, state clearly that someone died.

Give accurate information about how a person died. Explain what happened very simply, while omitting details that are frightening or traumatic. For example, "they died because they were very sick" or "they died in a car accident." Without information, children will make up their own version of events.

Make it clear that kids are not at fault. Children may believe something they said or did caused the person to die. Reinforce the fact that thoughts, words, and misbehavior do not kill people.

Reassure children they are safe. After a death–particularly the death of a caregiver–many kids become concerned about their own and their family's safety. Reassure children they are safe and will always be cared for by an adult.

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Caring for Children after a Death

Give choices. When a death creates chaos, having choices can restore a child's sense of control. For example, involve your child in planning the memorial service, and let them choose how to participate.

Use activities and rituals to remember the person who died. This could mean cooking the person's favorite meal, hanging a picture, writing in a journal, or anything else meaningful. Doing so will help children continue to think about and feel connected to the deceased.

Empathize with your child's grief. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to feel after a death. It's okay for kids to be very emotional, or not emotional at all. Some kids initially seem fine, or even relieved, but later express sadness and pain. No one should be shamed for how they feel.

Maintain normalcy wherever possible. Children thrive on structure and predictability. However, losing a loved one can throw life into disarray. Strive to keep regular routines such as mealtimes, bedtime, and daily activities.

Practice self-care. Your own ability to cope after a death will affect your child's ability to cope. Care for your mental and physical health by using social support, getting exercise, and maintaining healthy eating and sleeping habits.

Keep your emotions under control. It's okay for your children to see that you are upset, or to see you cry. However, avoid intense displays of emotion, which can be scary for kids.

Take any mention of suicide seriously. Just like adults, children may have powerful emotional reactions to the death of a loved one. It is appropriate to seek professional help when a child expresses suicidality or struggles to cope with their grief.

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