Helping Children Express Their Grief

GENERAL GUIDELINES
There are a number of strategies for helping children express their grief and related feelings. However, in reviewing these, don’t lose sight of the most important component of all: YOU. You are a person who cares, who reaches out to acknowledge their pain and wants to help. It’s okay if you make “mistakes” in what you say, we are human and we won’t always know what to do or say. Acknowledge your misstep and let them know you care and are here for them.

1. Self-Awareness
   - Be aware of your own feelings about loss or death in general, and children and death in particular.
   - Children learn to grieve from the attitudes, expressions, and behaviors of the significant adults in their lives.

2. Invite/Acknowledge/Listen/Give Permission
   - Communicate your support, by caring and being available in both verbal and non-verbal ways.
   - Give permission to grieve through sharing information; acknowledging reactions and feelings; and by providing various opportunities for expression.
   - Match their mode of expression in communicating with them.
   - Acknowledge and allow their pain; don’t overprotect or try to hurry them through it.
   - Be gentle and reassuring.
   - Your behavior, attitude and comfort level is more important than anything you can say.
   - Many times just sitting quietly and listening is sufficient support.

3. Provide Information
   - Give simple, honest and age-appropriate explanations about the death.
   - Fantasy is often more frightening than fact!
   - Use concrete, accurate language (death, dying and died) – no euphemisms (passed away/lost).
   - Reassure children that grief is the natural and normal reaction to death and it is highly individual.
   - Repeat information and give it over several sessions.

4. Check Out
   - Find out what they already know about death in general and what they know about this death in particular.
   - Learn their understanding of your information and words used by other adults.
   - Understand their fears and feelings (don’t make assumptions).
   - Find out what they really mean by their comments and questions.
   - Ask what would be helpful.
   - Watch for any changes in behavior.

5. Maintain Structure and Routine
   - Provide firm, caring structure that allows some flexibility, as required by the individual child’s grieving process; space and time to withdraw, to cry, etc.
   - Consistent rules and order are also important. “I know you miss your person, but we don’t hit because we are upset.”

6. Offer Opportunities to Create Rituals, Remember the Loss
   - Provide opportunities to say good-bye; these make the loss or death real.
### MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HELPING GRIEVING CHILDREN

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misconceptions</th>
<th>Facts</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. I won’t say or do the right thing.</td>
<td>1. Acknowledging them and their grief speaks sometimes more than the actual words you say. There are no magical words that will fix it, but instead try to convey that you care about them and are here for them.</td>
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<td>2. They won’t want to talk about it.</td>
<td>2. That’s often all they do want to talk about. Let them know you are a safe person for them to talk about their grief with.</td>
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<td>3. I might upset them/make them cry.</td>
<td>3. They are already grieving and if their grief spills out that is okay! That is healthy to release!</td>
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<td>4. They need to keep busy.</td>
<td>4. New activities confuse them. Avoiding thinking about it just delays their grief.</td>
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<td>5. Getting rid of reminders helps.</td>
<td>5. It tells them it’s wrong to think of the person who has died.</td>
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<td>6. I won’t mention it unless they do.</td>
<td>6. It suggests it isn’t okay to mention the person or that there is something bad about them/their person’s death/their grief.</td>
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<td>7. Once they’ve felt angry or guilty, that should be the end of it.</td>
<td>7. Grief is very complex and there are no stages to complete to be “over it”.</td>
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<td>8. It is morbid to want to touch or talk about the body.</td>
<td>8. It is healthy and concrete. It is a healthy way to say good-bye and make the death real.</td>
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<td>9. Using the words death and died are so harsh. It’s easier to say “passed away” or “gone to heaven.”</td>
<td>9. Children are literal creatures. To avoid confusion, use concrete words and explain what they mean.</td>
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<td>10. If they are not expressing grief, children aren’t grieving.</td>
<td>10. They may not know how to express their grief or may not have had permission to express what they are feeling.</td>
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