



Important Considerations of the Grieving Child

by Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

- There may be differences in priorities: what YOU think is important may NOT be important to the child.
- Do not EXPECT the child to behave in certain ways. If they immediately go outside to play after learning about the death, THAT'S OKAY! It doesn't mean the child doesn't care or doesn't understand.
- It is very important for children to see the adults around them express their grief. This gives the child "permission" to do the same.
- Children are very sensitive and perceptive as well as protective. They may decide not to express their grief openly because they do not want to risk "making mommy cry."
- Almost anything can activate grief reactions. Respect the child's need to express their grief.
- Grief causes difficulty in concentration. Children often experience a shortened attention span, and school work is often affected.
- Other losses often accompany the death. A change in residence, caretaker, school or peer group, adds to the loss. For the child's sense of security, it is important to try to stick to the usual family routine as much as possible.
- Children often know when they are not being told the whole truth, or when their questions are being avoided. Loss of TRUST will compound their grief.
- Grieving children are often busy with the task of establishing a new identity. "WHO AM I NOW?" becomes a major concern. Family roles may change as well as identities. This self-search often overshadows all other concerns for many weeks and months. (This pertains especially to pre-teens and teens.)
- Grief lasts far longer than anyone expects. It may take months or even years before a child displays signs of the full impact of a family change; especially one as significant as death.
- Children and young people will continue to deal with the losses/changes they experience as they grow through their grief and discover that love never goes away.

Suggestions for Helping Children Cope with Grief

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- Be available - physically and emotionally.
- Listen...with your ears, eyes and heart.
- Answer ALL of the child's questions as directly and as honestly as you can even if the answer is, "I don't know." This expresses your respect toward the child and the very real feelings they are experiencing. Children tend to know when they aren't being told the whole truth; sometimes the answers they will come up with in their own minds are much more frightening than the truth.
- Face your own feelings of loss and grief. Sharing these feelings makes you vulnerable and in turn helps the child to feel more at ease becoming vulnerable in expressing their feelings. Children need to see the adults in their lives expressing their grief. This gives the child "permission" to grieve as well.
- Encourage and define appropriate expressions of grief (talking, drawing, writing, yelling, running, etc.). Provide appropriate and "safe" places for grief expression.
- Acknowledge the reality that the loss HURTS! Do not attempt to "rescue" the child (or yourself) from the hurt; allow the hurt to exist as it is. (This isn't easy!)
- Encourage the child to establish their own quiet, private place to go to whenever they need to be alone.
- Do not isolate or insulate children from death or from grief.
- Try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensations. The child needs to feel a part of their peer group and should be expected to function accordingly.
- Maintain a daily routine if at all possible. Continuity provides children with a sense of security and stability during a time full of uncertainty.
- Try not to expect too much from yourself or from the child. Temper your expectations with kindness and understanding.
- Grief is a life long journey and children will continue to grieve at different development milestones. Your caring presence can help assist them all along the way.