

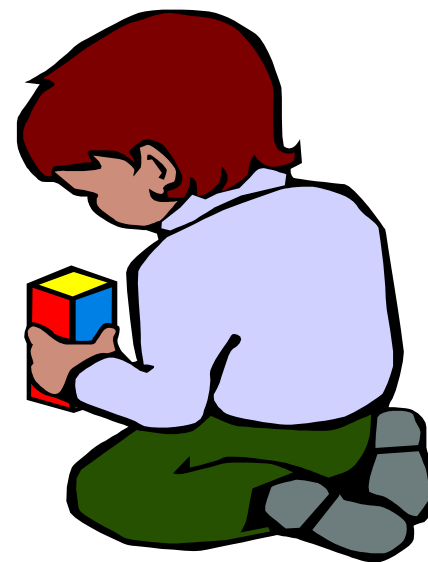
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What Can I Do?

A Guide for Parents/Grandparents to Help
Children/Grandchildren when someone they
love is dying or has died.



Developed by St. Joseph's
Care Group
Hospice Unit

Helpful Books and Websites

For Children:

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss by Michaelene Mundy

I Will Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm

The Next Place (non-religious) by Warren Hanson

I'll Love You Forever by Robert Munsch

The Two of Them by Alik

For Adults:

Helping Children Cope With the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grown Ups by William Kroen

Grandparents Don't Just Babysit by Ruth Isbister

Healing Children's Grief: Surviving a Parent's Death from Cancer by Grace Hyslop Christ

Talking with Children About Loss by T. Berry Brazelton

www.griefnet.org

www.kidsource.com

www.beyondindigo.com

www.hospicecares.org

www.childrensgrief.net

www.pallcare.org

When you have a family member or close friend who is dying it is often a challenge to know what to say to your child or the children in your life such as nieces, nephews and grandchildren.

In this booklet we will talk about a "loved person" (or special person). This person can be a parent, grandparent, Aunt, Uncle or anyone that your child/grandchild cares about and loves.

It is sometimes a challenge to know how to talk with children/grandchildren about dying and death. Sometimes adults will not want to cry in front of children because they worry it will upset them too much. However, expressing your own emotions gives the child permission to express his or her feelings. Be prepared to provide physical comfort (hugs) and listen. Let your child/grandchild ask questions. It is okay if you don't have all of the answers.

Grandparents assume a variety of roles in caring for their grandchildren. Often times it is a caregiving role, others it is the role of playmate and friend. When a family member is terminally ill, it shifts the role of each family member and how family members respond to one another. It is difficult to have a son or daughter who is suffering from a terminal illness, and being an active caregiver to their children during this process is a very big challenge as well.

This guide is for parents and grandparents who are helping to care for their children or grandchildren when a loved person in their family is terminally ill.

Helping the Grieving Child

As a parent or grandparent, you are a trusted figure in the life of the child/grandchild and you can play an important role in helping your child/grandchild through their grieving process.

It is very important to recognize when a child is grieving; there are some signs that can alert you to this:

- Wanting to talk about their ill loved one
- Dreaming about their love who has died
- Sometimes, tiredness; lack of energy
- Sometimes, changes in performance at school
- Sometimes, sleep disturbance

It is very important to talk to the grieving child about what they are feeling. Children might not always recognize that they are feeling a certain way because a person they love is dying or has died. If you talk about it, it gives the child a sign that it is okay to talk about death. It is important to tell them that it is normal to feel what they are feeling; tell them that it is okay to feel sad and to cry. It is okay to cry yourself as it lets the child know it is okay to express his or her feelings and that he or she can talk to you.

It is also important to affirm that grieving takes time; that even later on if they feel sad it is okay. It is good to remind them that they will always hold on to a little piece of grief, but the big wave of sadness or grief they are feeling now won't stay forever.

The real miracle is the love that inspires them. In this sense, everything that comes from love is a miracle.”

Some families create special ways to remember their loved person.

Balloons: With parents, grandparents and other family members, the child or children can write a note and tie it to a helium filled balloon. The adults and child/children can say a few words about the person they all love who has died. Then the child/children can release their balloons into the sky as a symbol of love and remembrance.

Shared Traits: Just like when you are helping a child complete a “Memory Book”, at any time, you can remember fun, interesting, valued traits of your loved one and ask the child which interests or personality traits he or she shares with their loved person who has died. This may help the child to feel a positive connection to their loved one.

Draw a picture to put beside your loved one's bed.

Create your own special family ritual to remember your loved one.

Every family is unique and you may have your own ideas on how to best remember your loved one.

Ask your child/grandchild for ideas.

It is also okay to think of all the good times your family has had together. Here are some ideas for your memory book.

Draw a picture for your special person who is in the hospital.

You can trace your loved one's hand and then your own hand (inside their hand)

Include photographs in your memory book.

Ask your Mom, Dad, Aunts, Uncles, and cousin's if they remember a funny, exciting or special story. Or, Mom / Dad can write a short story about a lesson your special person taught them.

Do you have a story to tell about your special person?

Example:

My Grandma is a great cook and baker. One day she let me help her bake cookies. I spilled the flour on the floor. I thought she would be angry, but she laughed and showed me how to clean up the flour. I love my Grandma.

Put a photograph of you and your Grandma next to your story.

What is something that you learned from your special person?
Put that thought in your book.

Do you have a photograph to go with this story?
Put the photograph in your memory book.



After the death of a loved person, children may feel out of control. This is why it is important to make life as normal as possible during the grief experience. Allow the child to make choices (within reason) such as to spend time with friends, go outside and play or go to school when they feel ready. Find a balance between allowing a child time to play and still complete their regular activities at home and as school.

Allowing the child to make choices when possible creates a sense of control during a time in their life when they may not have much control over anything else. If they are not given these choices, not only are they losing their normal lifestyle in terms of losing a loved person, but they are also losing the normal supports they had prior to the death.

After a death, so many things change that it is important to have some consistency in the life of a child. By just being there to answer questions, play or just sit; as a constant source of support, you are making a difference in the life of your child/grandchild.

“Miracles occur naturally as expressions of love.

Will I die too?

When children experience the death of someone close to them, they begin to question their own mortality. Let them know that everything that is alive, all animals, plants and people die at sometime.

Explain to them that often times people live a long life, and sometimes people get very sick and die sooner than others. Explain that we have no way of knowing when we will die.

Does he/she know that I love him/her?

Children may question if their loved person knows their love for them. Assure them that their loved person loved them very much and knew how much the child cared about them as well.

No matter what question your child/grandchild asks you, it is important to:

1) Normalize

let them know that the way they are feeling and responding are normal

2) Reassure

let them know they can ask all the questions they need to and that you are not afraid of answering them.



We Remember You

Helpful Activities for Grieving Children

For many children who are experiencing grief, it is important for them to “do” something to show their feelings. This also provides a safe way for the emotions they are experiencing. These activities may bring you and your child/grandchild together more than you could have anticipated.

Memory Books

This Memory Book is for child/grandchild and family to share.

It is best if children and adults work on this book together. The Memory Book can be done with your loved person when he/she is in the hospital or at any time to remember your loved person.

You can add your own ideas to make this memory book wonderful. Photographs, your drawings of stories, stickers.

We all have special people in our lives, fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, Aunts, Uncles and many others. When someone you love, your special person, is in the hospital it can make you feel sad that they are sick.

It is okay to feel sad and even to cry sometimes.

Questions Kids Ask About Death

Your Own Grief

Not only are you helping your family through their grief process, you are also going through your own grief. It is important to remember that your grief is as important as the grief of your other family members.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. People often experience physical, emotional, social and spiritual reactions to grief. Grieving is unique to each individual; however you experience grief is the right way for you. Please seek out community grief counseling if you are feeling overwhelmed and need more support.

How long the grieving period lasts depends on many things such as: your relationship with the person who has died, how and what happened at the time of death, and what happened after death.

You will grieve for many things, not just the death itself; you will grieve for what you have lost already and the losses of the future (hopes and dreams of your future with your loved one). The experience of this loss may resurrect old losses and feelings of unfinished business from the past.

During your grief, it is important that you forgive yourself for all of the “shoulds”- what you should have said, what you should have done. In addition to forgiving yourself, you need to take care of yourself. Grief is very tiring; both to the body and the spirit. Maintaining a well balanced diet and indulging yourself in the things you enjoy will be soothing to your health and to your soul.

The following are common questions asked by children about death:

What happens when we die?

Children may ask what happens physiologically when we die. It is important to tell the truth and describe it in terms that they understand.

Does it hurt?

Children may correlate death with pain. It is important to explain that when someone is dying, the doctors try to give the person medicine so that they do not feel pain.

Where do we go when we die?

Children may ask about an afterlife or another life after this one. It is important to ask them what they hope happens when we die. Many adults refer to their own religious or personal beliefs about death to help explain to children what happens after death.

Do I have to go to the funeral?

Children may feel a sense of obligation to do the things that adults do. Reassure them that they should only do what they feel comfortable with. No matter what their choice is, assure them that you will support their decision.

Did I cause the death to happen?

Children may think they have “magical powers” and that perhaps something they did or said caused the death of their loved one. It is important to reassure them that there is nothing they did that caused this to happen.

Children's Reactions to Death

Children are often thought of as needing protection when a death occurs, however, children who are not explained what has happened tend to become frightened and afraid to ask questions. Whenever possible, sharing information truthfully and clearly with children can often open the door to communication and prove to be helpful in the grief of children. The following are common reactions to death by children:

0 to 2 years old

Although they cannot speak infants who have been separated from their mother may be quiet, sluggish, and undergo weight changes.

Older children (1-2 years old) may see death as the same as sleep and see it as temporary.

3-5 years old

See the death as a kind of sleep where the person is still alive in a limited way (ie. Life = movement, death= not moving).

Children in this age group may think that death is temporary and reversible, not final. These children may connect the death with the events that preceded it, in a cause and effect way (ie. Grandpa died because he went to the hospital).

6-8 years old

Children who fall into this age group are often very curious about death and may be interested in the concrete aspects of death (ie. What happens to the body when someone dies?). They may think that death is a punishment for an action, may think that death happens to everyone except them, may see death as a part of old age, and may perceive death as frightening.

Children in this group may become overly concerned with their own health or withdraw from others. They may not want to go to school and develop antisocial behaviors.

9 years and older

Children in this age group generally understand the universality and inevitability of death. They often begin to understand that it happens to everyone, both young and old. This is often of concern to children as they see themselves as vulnerable to death.

Children in this category begin to recognize the impact the death has on other people in the family.

Children in this age group can experience endless questions about death, and also covering up of emotions to try and act "normal" (ie. Acting as if nothing happened)

Why Using the Proper Terminology is Important

Adults are often afraid to use the words "dying" and "death" with children as they feel obligated to protect them. Children need to know that death is final; the person is not "sleeping" or "gone away". By using such terms, children may be fearful of sleeping, as they may die too, or they may fear when you go away, even for a second, that you may not come back.