

Helping Children Grieve for a Loved One

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When the loss of someone precious suddenly becomes part of your family's story, it can take enormous emotional energy to do even the simplest thing. For you, if you're already grieving, this is a tough time to do extra work – the work of learning how to help your children grieve well. But you are wise to take that step – to do the work, to learn. You and your children will be much better for it.

As difficult as this time may be for you, what you model for your children now is very important. It will very likely become your child's blueprint for dealing with all the painful losses they will face in life.

Your children need to learn from you how to approach their grief in a healthy way. And even though you may be in a place of debilitating pain at present, doing some important things right can ensure that neither you nor your children get stuck there.

Healthy grieving, in the end, helps you discover that sorrow and happiness can co-exist. You'll be able to carry your memories of your loved one with you always, without those memories diminishing your enjoyment of life in the present, or your hope for the future.

So what does healthy grieving look like for you and your kids? Here are some fundamental things you need to know.

Don't try to protect your child from the pain

Grief is a necessary pain – and that's true for children as well as adults. We can't properly process the loss of our loved one without fully feeling the pain of their loss. We need to hurt in order to heal.

For a child, help and healing come when they can talk about the person they've lost with a trusted, non-judgmental adult – no matter how many tears that brings – and can also talk through the full range of their feelings of sorrow, anger, guilt, fear or confusion, which are all a normal part of grieving.

But a parent's instincts often work against that healthy grieving process. We hate to see our child in pain. So what do we do? Parents often unconsciously model maladaptive strategies that teach kids to deny their painful feelings. If you're grieving, be alert for ways you might be sending your children unhelpful messages about how to grieve.

Don't teach your kids to distract themselves from their painful feelings

Faced with a young child who's missing Daddy, for example, and sobbing into their pillow at night, the remaining parent might be tempted to say, *Granddad's taking us all to Disneyland in the spring. Why don't you think about that instead?* What the child really needs, in that moment, is to talk through their feelings about missing their dad.

Staying busy – whether by packing our schedule, frenzied cleaning or working long hours – is another way parents can teach grieving kids *Distract yourself from pain – just like I do*. Raised with that model, teens can find all kinds of other ways to run from their feelings, be it endless online gaming, alcohol, drugs or the “thrill” of high-risk activities.

What helps instead: H. Norman Wright, trauma specialist and author of *It's Okay to Cry*, urges parents to help their children face their pain, not hide from it. “The ‘empty spot’ in your child's life is

actually your child's 'teacher,' " writes Wright. "The empty spot is there because of her love for her pet or parent or whatever she lost.... It teaches her how much she loved Tabby as well as how much she could love something or someone else. That's good."

To help your child, try to frame a number of your discussions so they convey a message like this:

It was clear to everyone that you really loved your Dad, and he really loved you too. You're a lovable kid. You still have many people in your life who love you.

Don't teach your kids to stay quiet about their "bad" feelings

Many grieving parents fear that seeing their grief will add to *their* kids' pain. Or they fear their kids will interpret their pain as a lack of faith in God, or a lack of faith in the joys of heaven. So they stoically determine to "be strong in front of the kids," only venting their grief in private.

In his book *Children and Grief*, grief-recovery specialist Joey O'Connor explains why keeping "a stiff upper lip" is a bad idea. "What some parents call strength, kids can and often do interpret as indifference, coldness, lack of love or the unspoken message that death and grief are so bad that they shouldn't be talked about."

What helps instead: Make sure your children know they have your permission to mourn – that they don't have to hide their true feelings.

Be as available to your kids as possible. In as many ways as you can, invite your children to talk with you about how they're feeling, so they can process their grief.

When your children begin sharing, accept and affirm their feelings "as is." Never try to "correct" their feelings, or tell your kids how they "should" feel. At this critical time, your children must be sure that they can trust you, so handle their feelings with care. A misstep that brings hurt or encourages "hiding feelings" might drive your child away from you, and they need you now more than ever.

Let your children know the topic is never taboo by often talking about your own difficult feelings. With a teen, for example, you might invite them into conversation like this:

You were very quiet tonight. Were you thinking about Dad? I miss him so much. You won't make me feel any worse by talking about him. I'd love to talk about him. I might cry, but it helps me. But we don't have to do that right now if you don't feel like it. What do you think?

With a young child, you might want to sit down with a photo album to "share memories of Daddy." Lead by saying how you feel, and help your young child to identify and label their emotions. For example, you might say something like:

I've been thinking how much I miss Daddy, and it makes me feel sad. I'm guessing you might feel sad too. Am I right?

When your children begin to open up, be prepared for a full range of strong emotions – not just sadness – and for revelations that may surprise you. It's perfectly normal for a grieving child to struggle with:

Anger - *I'm so angry that God let Dad die.*

Doubt - *I want to believe Dad's in heaven, but I'm not sure about anything anymore.*

Regret - *I should have visited Dad in hospital that one time, but I went to my friend's place instead.*

Fear - *What if you die too? / Will we have to move now?*

Guilt - *I was mad at Daddy and wished he would go away. And now he has. It's my fault.*

Confusion – *But why can't Daddy visit us from heaven?*

As you affirm your child's feelings, try to keep your conversation hope-filled. You could say something like,

I can understand why you feel that way. At times, I feel that way too. [Pause to encourage more sharing by your child.] We won't always feel this bad, but right now, it's perfectly normal for us to feel so upset.

Helpful steps in the grieving process

Grieving children need to feel “still in touch” with the person they loved. Many kids are plagued by fear that they will slowly lose their memories of that person. To help, make sure your child has their own photos of the deceased to keep, and let them choose personal items that belonged to their loved one that they can keep for themselves.

In their book *When Children Grieve*, John James, Russell Friedman and Dr. Leslie Matthews from the Grief Recovery Institute stress the importance of helping your child recall as many memories of time spent with their loved one as possible, and recording those memories for posterity – usually in written form.

Recording all the memories you can is immensely valuable in itself, but it's just the first step – say James and colleagues – in something very important to the grieving process, which is addressing any *unresolved grief*.

Each time your child recalls their memories of the person they miss, listen carefully for anything that seems “emotionally unfinished” in the relationship, advise James et al. What do they wish could have been “different, better or more”?

Do they wish they had visited Dad in hospital “that one last time”? Do they regret an argument with Dad that was never resolved? What activity with Dad will they especially miss? (Think annual holiday, Christmas traditions, an upcoming graduation or other hopes and dreams that have been impacted.) These are places where kids can get “stuck” in their grief, becoming preoccupied with what they did or didn't do, or what their loved one did or didn't do, or can't do now. All these kinds of issues need to be grieved specifically.

“It is essential that we complete what is unfinished for us,” write James and colleagues. To that end, they urge parents to encourage their children to write a “completion letter” to their loved one. Essential elements that should be included in the letter are:

Apologies – Anything the child feels they need to be forgiven for

Forgiveness – Anything the child feels they need to forgive their loved one for

Significant emotional statements – Anything the child wishes they had said to the person

Fond memories – A thank you for recollections of especially significant events and memories

Goodbye – A concluding statement that, in essence says, *I love you. I will miss you. I will never forget you. Goodbye (name).*

Although the person they miss won't hear it, the child does need to read their letter aloud to someone they trust in order for it to be healing, say James et al. "Completing the emotional aspects of the relationship allows the child to say goodbye to the physical relationship."

There will be lots of tears as the completion letter is read, but as the tears begin to wane, ask your child if they can still recall a memory of their loved one. Your purpose is to help your child realize that saying goodbye didn't make them lose their memories of that person. As more memories come in the future, your child can simply write a post-script to their letter if they feel something needs to be added.

For a young child, it might be best to lead them through similar steps as they talk aloud to a picture of their loved one.

If your child seems repeatedly troubled by an issue, you can gently remind them, *I heard you tell Daddy about that already in your letter.*

In all this, you are helping your child build a foundation for healthy, life-long patterns of being able to talk about painful feelings and find relief and comfort through close relationships with others. Hopefully it will bring you some relief, too, to realize that your child doesn't need you to "fix" their sad feelings. They just need you to listen to their aching heart.

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