

Helping your child cope with loss

Loss of a grandparent

The death of a grandparent is often the first major bereavement in a child's life. The grief a child feels will usually be in relation to how much of a part their grandparent has played in the child's life. The grieving may not be as longlasting as that following a parent or sibling's death, but you should never ignore it.

Loss of a sibling

The loss of a sibling is often particularly difficult for a child because he may not get the required support or sympathy from his parents who are, understandably, wrapped up in their own tragedy. But the child who has lost a sister or brother will be just as devastated. When asked how her teenage sons had reacted when their younger sister was killed in a car crash, one mother said, 'I really cannot tell you. I was so traumatised I wasn't able to think about them at all.' The death of a child close to their age also makes children aware of their own mortality and this can cause great anxiety.

Loss of a parent

The death of a parent is the most painful loss for a child. As the most significant person in their child's world, life as he knows it is disrupted and irreversibly changed. This is a time of great suffering for both the child and the surviving parent. The surviving parent is thrust into a new role – that of single parent. But not only do they have to deal with their own reactions, they have to respond to their child's needs. The way in which a parent can meet both needs will affect how well the child adapts to the death and to subsequent life changes.

How to help your child understand death

Parents are expected to teach their children the facts of life but very few ever teach the facts of death. Instead we try to shield our children from this harsh reality. Of course, when a child is confronted with a serious loss there will always be shock and grief, but if we are able to communicate openly on the subject and offer loving support, this will go a long way in helping him cope. It's also important to realise that bereaved children often react in different ways – some will be withdrawn and quiet while others might seem unaffected, even callous (which could be their way of coping). There is no right way for a child to grieve.

Here are some suggestions on how to help children understand death.

* Teach with pets and plants. Children mourn when their pets die and this helps them work through their grief and offers the opportunity to gain a gradual understanding of human death. Don't replace the animal right away. Talk about the life cycle of plants, using the same language for all living things (plants live, plants grow, plants die).

* Be open to questions. When a child asks about death, don't avoid answering or try to change the subject. Speak openly about death without fear or denial. What children fear most is the unknown. They imagine the worst and this makes them anxious.

* Give accurate information immediately. In most deaths there is a precise reason and this should be shared with the child. For example, 'Grandpa's heart stopped beating'.

* Be honest. Always answer truthfully no matter the child's age. Keep your language age-appropriate and discuss the facts of death as they come up.

* Don't assume they want more information than they do. Find out exactly what the child wants to know. Often a simple fact is all they want.

* Avoid euphemisms. Say, 'He died', rather than 'He passed away', or 'We lost him'. Euphemisms are vague and create confusion.

* Don't equate death with sleep or sickness. It's easy for a child to confuse sleep with death as in both states a person lies very still. He needs reassurance that death is not a long sleep and that when he goes to sleep at night, it is to get rest.

* Explain terminal illness. If there is advance warning of the death of a loved one, let the child know how the disease will be treated and of the chances of recovery.

* Don't try to stop the grieving process. Give your child permission to grieve. To help prevent future emotional difficulties encourage your child to talk about feelings of grief such as fear, anger, guilt and loneliness. Explain that these feelings are appropriate and normal, and so is crying. z Keep the family together. Try to maintain the family routine as much as possible as this helps a child feel more secure.

* Be open about your tears and feelings. Say, 'I feel very sad because grandpa died'. Don't pretend nothing has happened.

* Talk about the person who has died. Remembering good times and wonderful things about the person creates memories that help the child accept the death. Let the child choose something tangible to keep as a memento. Encourage him to draw a picture or write a letter.

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* Consider professional help. It might be easier for a child to confide in a therapist than to talk to family members.

Should children go to funerals?

Although we want to protect children from the pain that bereavement brings and may feel it best to exclude them from funerals, this could be a mistake. They need to be a part of the family's grieving process. Children should be asked if they want to attend and their decision respected. It is difficult for them if they're not sure what has happened to the dead person and haven't had a chance to say goodbye. Funerals are difficult for the adults involved so make sure that someone close to the child takes special care of them during the service.

When violence is involved

For far too many of our children, death of a loved one is as a result of a violent act. In her book, *Helping Children Cope With Grief* (SPCK Publishing), Rosemary Wells writes, 'When a family member has been a murder victim, then hate and terror are added to a child's emotions – their lives are shattered.' Helping a child who has gone through such an experience cope takes time and patience. It is important for them to know that there are adults who can handle the situation. Encourage them to talk about how they feel and acknowledge their anger. Understand that anger is a tough emotion to handle and it is often difficult for children to find a non-destructive outlet. Allow them to share their feelings of anger with you, rather than acting on them.

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