

Talking to Children about Death

Good Grief: What Is It?



The following is based on material prepared by child bereavement expert, Maria Trozzi, M.Ed., for parents, relatives and other adults who have an opportunity to help bereaved children and adolescents. According to Ms. Trozzi, when a death occurs, adults can play an important role. No matter the circumstances of the death, it challenges the coping skills of youngsters. Early attention to their needs makes it possible to keep them psychologically healthy and prevents the development of future emotional problems. This information should help you raise young people who are able to deal with loss in a healthy way – a way that will make their grief “Good Grief.”

The Four Tasks of Mourning

*As described in 1985 by the late Dr. Sandra Fox, founder of the Good Grief Program Model.

In order for grief to be “good grief,” bereaved children and adolescents must accomplish four psychological tasks. Young children who develop coping skills that help them with these tasks will be well-prepared for losses that occur throughout their life. The four tasks are:

- Understanding
- Grieving
- Commemorating
- Going on

Understanding

To understand, a person must be able to make sense of death in general and of a particular death. It's best to provide an honest explanation that can be developed as the child grows and matures. Children's questions will usually indicate the amount and level of information they want to know.

Three predictable factors interfere with young people's ability to accomplish the task of understanding.

1. Defining Death for Children

The best and most basic way to explain death is to simply say, “The body stops working.” This definition fits what children observe when they see a dead animal. The bird can no longer fly or sing. In the same way, Grandpa can no longer drive his car, breathe, talk or go fishing. Young people have a literal, concrete style of thinking, so avoid comparing death with sleeping, expiring, kicking the bucket, pushing up the daisies, or other euphemisms that will confuse them.

2. Development of Children's Understanding of Death and Dying

Young people's understanding of death and dying changes as they grow and mature. Age parameters vary, but most pass through a sequence of developmental stages. There are several reference materials available from your funeral director, local library or Internet that can provide the details on each stage.

3. Magical Thinking

Children believe they have the power to make things happen in the world. They often believe death is the result of something they did or didn't do, think or say. For example, if they say, “drop dead” to a person who later dies, they are sure they caused the death.

Grieving

Normal grief includes both sadness and anger. A young person's specific style of grieving will depend on such things as their age, relationship to the person who died and suddenness of the death. Each will grieve in his/her own way and at his/her own time if we make that possible. We must be careful not to convey there is only one “right way.” Normal acute grief for adults can take two to three years. This is when they finally feel that while the world will not be the same, they can still go on. For children, grieving lasts longer. Although they grieve in short spurts, most will still be actively grieving through adolescence.

Commemorating

When a friend or family member dies, youngsters must find some way to formally or informally remember the person. Such activity confirms the reality of the death and the value of life. It is important that young people be included in the planning for formal (a wake, funeral, etc.) or informal (share a memento, launch balloons, etc.) commemoration activities/events.

Going On

When children and adolescents have accomplished the tasks of understanding, grieving and commemorating, they often need specific permission – spoken out loud – to “go on.” Going on needs to be differentiated from “forgetting” and from criticism that can seem to be implied in such a description. When a youngster seems unable to “go on,” it is useful to review the tasks in reverse order. If one can determine where a child is “stuck,” it is often possible to help youngsters move forward with their grief, so it can be good grief.

Ways to Help Bereaved Children

1. Recognize your own feelings. Think about your own experiences with loss, separation and death. They may have an impact on your ability to help young people with their grief.
2. Share the fact of death. Provide age appropriate information about what happened and what rituals will occur. Be aware of the four psychological tasks.
3. Be aware of issues that make a specific child vulnerable. These include such things as too many recent losses, being the best friend or worst enemy of the person who has died, or having had some actual responsibility for the death. A prompt referral to a mental health center may be a good idea.
4. Address the child's fears and fantasies. Be particularly aware of those that grow out of magical thinking and reflect an inappropriate sense of responsibility for the death.
5. Discuss issues specific to the situation. Children may want to talk about illness, about violence or suicide, about alcohol and drug use, or about troubled adults who hurt children. They may want to know about wakes and funerals, about cremation and burial, or about ethnic and cultural diversity in death rituals.
6. Support young people as they grieve. Provide an environment where grieving is safe and accepted. Talk specifically about the appropriateness of sadness and anger. Share your own grief, being sure they know they have not caused your tears or anger.
7. Remember the person who died and help young people participate. Commemorative activities may go on over a period of time.
8. Use teachable moments to begin or continue a program to help young people learn about death and dying. Daily activities and more dramatic life events provide many opportunities to talk about death and dying and about grief and loss.

Good Grief

When children and adolescents deal with a loss, the resulting grief can be turned into good grief. The key is preparing them to deal with their intense grief and loss. Death challenges our coping skills. Turning a child's grief to good grief creates coping mechanisms that will help them be prepared for losses that occur in life.



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or more detailed information on this and other topics.***