

CHILDRENS' GRIEF

Grief is the constellation of thoughts and feelings the child experiences following the death. For children to heal, they must be taught and encouraged to mourn and to express their grief outside themselves.

Children often ask the "why?" question. They don't need a pat answer; what they need is a safe place to talk, think, and play out their feelings about this question.

Boys often have more difficulty in allowing themselves to feel helpless and express their grief. Girls sometimes repress appropriate grief-borne anger.

Caring adults will generally find their efforts well received if they make themselves available to young children. Adolescents often find it hard to accept help. Their primary developmental task – to separate from their parents and other adult caregivers - runs contrary to seeking help from these same people.

Six Reconciliation Needs of Mourning

Need 1. Acknowledge the Reality of Death.

Children must be provided with an honest and open explanation (at their developmental level of understanding) about the nature and cause of the death. News of a death is best conveyed from someone who has a preexisting, stabilizing relationship with the child. The ability to acknowledge the reality of the death often comes only after the child is provided with opportunities to talk out, play out, or even act out the circumstances of the death.

Need 2. Move Toward the Pain of the Loss While Being Nurtured.

To heal, the bereaved child should be encouraged to embrace the wide range of thoughts and feelings that result from the death. The art of helping children with this need is to allow them to teach you how they feel. Sometimes what they need from adults is an awareness that it is ok to talk about and play out their many thoughts and feelings. Children mourn intermittently; we should acknowledge this wave-like quality in their capacity to mourn.

Need 3. Convert the Relationship from one of Presence to One of Memory.

This need involves allowing and encouraging children to move from the "here and now" of their relationship to the "what was". The relationship must be altered from one of presence to one of memory. This process often begins with the funeral. One of the best ways to embrace memories is through the creation of a "Memory Book". Remembering makes hope possible.

Need 4. Develop a New Self-Identity.

Personal identity or self-perception comes from the ongoing process of establishing a sense of who one is. The death of someone loved can, and often does, permanently change the child's self-perception. As children work on this central need of mourning, the child often finds themselves thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that seem totally foreign. This is an inherent part of the search for a new identity in the absence of the person who died. While everyone in the family will have new roles and responsibilities when a death occurs, we should never assign inappropriate role responsibilities to children (i.e., "Now you are the man of the house." This puts an impossible burden on a child. The identity of bereaved children is also impacted in that they become aware that they and others around them are mortal.

Need 5. Search for Meaning in the Loss.

This involves allowing the child to search for and restore a sense of meaning in life after the death. "How?" and "Why?" questions. Many adults make the mistake of thinking they must always have answers to the bereaved child's questions. Adults need to know they do not have all the answers. Suffering is inherent to the child's work on this reconciliation need. This is a painful yet natural part of the work of mourning. We have to remind ourselves of the collective wisdom of the ages that says people reflect on the true meaning of life when they experience loss.

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Need 6. Experience Long-Term Support.

Grief is a process, not an event. Children who actively participate in the work of mourning will need stabilizing adults in their lives long after the event of the death. Grief is not an enemy to overcome, but a necessary consequence of having loved. Children's "griefbursts" – heightened periods of loss and sadness – demand understanding, not judgment. Griefbursts may occur during pivotal life moments (birthdays, holidays, vacations, graduation, getting married, having children, etc)

Nine Common Myths of Childhood Grief

Myth 1: Grief and mourning are the same experience.

Grief represents the thoughts and feelings that are experienced within children when someone they loved dies (internal). Mourning means taking the internal experiences of grief and expressing it outside oneself (external). Because bereaved children mourn more through their behaviors than they do with words, mourning for them is typically not expressed in the same ways it is for adults.

Myth 2: Children only grieve for a short time.

Bereaved children do not heal quickly; it can often take years.

Myth 3: A child's grief proceeds in predictable, orderly stages.

People use the "stages of grief" to try and make sense of an experience that is not as orderly and predictable as we would like it to be.

Myth 4. Caregivers do not have to mourn for their children to mourn.

Parents and other significant adults in a child's life have the biggest influence on the child's own grief experiences. The problem comes when parents, however loving and well-intentioned, try to conceal their own grief and mourning from their children in an attempt to protect them from more pain. This is a mistake, as appropriate modeling is a primary way that children learn.

Myth 5: Bereaved children grow to be maladjusted adults.

Bereaved children can heal and grow with early intervention and compassionate care.

Myth 6: Children are better off if they do not attend funerals.

The funeral provides a structure that allows and encourages both adults and children to comfort each other, openly mourn, and honor the life of the person who has died. Children should be encouraged to attend, but never forced.

Myth 7: Children who cry too much are being weak and are harming themselves.

When bereaved children cry, they are indicating their willingness to do the work of mourning.

Myth 8: Children are too young to understand death.

Teaching abstract concepts about death and religion is no easy task, but it is one we must take seriously as we try to help bereaved children. Bereaved children need age-appropriate care.

Myth 9: We should help children "get over" their grief.

Healthy mourning takes a long time. Like adults, children do not get over grief; they learn to live with it.

Notes taken from Brock, S., Lazerus, P., & Jimerson, S. 2002. Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention. NASP Publications, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402. Bethesda, MD 20814. pp. 653-674.