

THE WELLNESS CORPORATION

Helping Your Children Cope With Death

The death of a loved one is difficult for anyone. But for children, such a loss can be devastating.

Many parents wait until a death occurs to work with their children on dealing with the idea of death. But that can be especially difficult if the parents are dealing with grief themselves. Taking time to reflect on your beliefs about death and your experiences with it, and then sharing those with your children helps them prepare for loss when it eventually happens, according to the National Mental Health Association (NMHA).

"For children, the loss of a parent, sibling, relative or friend can affect their sense of security," says Kathy HoganBruen, senior director of prevention at the NMHA. "Helping children cope with their loss is crucial in enabling them to resume their lives fully at home and school."

Children deal with death in many different ways, and not necessarily in the same manner as adults. Preschoolers have difficulty understanding that death isn't temporary, but children between the ages of about 5 and 9 years begin to experience grief more like adults.

The ways children respond to death include:

- Denial, shock and confusion
- Anger and irritability
- Inability to sleep or nightmares
- Loss of appetite
- Fear of being alone
- Physical complaints, such as stomachaches and headaches
- Loss of concentration
- Guilt over failure to prevent the loss
- Depression or a loss of interest in daily activities and events
- Reverting to outgrown behaviors (e.g., bed-wetting, "baby talk" or thumb-sucking)
- Withdrawal from friends
- Excessively imitating or asking questions about the deceased or making repeated statements of wanting to join the deceased
- Inventing games about dying

"Don't be alarmed if your child reacts in any of these ways to a loss," says Ms. HoganBruen. "These are normal responses, and, in time, most children will return to the

behaviors they had before the person died."

Helping children heal

"Children, like adults, need time to grieve and be upset," says Ms. HoganBruen. "One of the most important things you can do is to let them know you're ready to listen, and provide reassurance they aren't alone in their pain."

Here are some issues to consider when helping children resume normal activities after a death:

- Don't try to protect your child from the grief you may be feeling after a loss. Allow your child to see what you are feeling.
- Children are concrete in their thinking. To lessen confusion, avoid expressions such as "passed on" or "went to sleep." "Answer their questions about death simply and honestly," says Ms. HoganBruen. "But only offer details they can absorb. Don't overload them with information."
- Death can make children fearful about the future. Give them a chance to talk about their fears and validate their feelings. Share happy memories about the person who died. Offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen. Your religion should be able to help you talk about the meaning of life and death, as well as offer comfort. If you are not religious, you can still talk about a higher meaning of life, the Nemours Foundation says. You can also do good works to honor the person who has died. Teach your children that there is a reason for everything, even death.
- Children need choices. Whenever possible, offer choices in what they do or don't do to memorialize the deceased and how they express their feelings about the death. You might offer to help them plant a tree or dedicate a place in memory of the person.
- Children tend to blame themselves. Emphasize to them that the death wasn't their fault and that there was nothing they could have done differently to prevent it. Explain that the person who died loved them and would want them to be happy.

Some children need outside help to deal with their grief. Seek help from a school counselor, clergy or family and child counselor in your area if you feel your child needs more help dealing with the loss. If you recognize any possible signs of depression or suicidal behavior, seek help immediately from a mental health professional or your doctor.

Here are signs to watch for:

- Your child begins being disruptive in school.
- Your child's grades begin to slide.
- Your child behaves differently, perhaps being quiet now when he or she was once

talkative.

"It can take children a long time to recover from the loss of someone they love," says Ms. HoganBruen. "Their grief may return in cycles throughout their childhood or adolescence. A strong reminder, such as the anniversary of a death, may reawaken grief. However, making yourself available to talk can make a substantial difference."

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