

Helping children cope with grief

Bereaved children and teenagers experience grief differently than adults, depending on their age, developmental stage, experience and understanding of the process. Parents struggle to talk to them about death and loss. There are simple, straightforward and practical ways parents can use that can make a real difference.

1. How can I help my child cope with the loss of his/her loved one?

The death of someone dear is exhausting for everybody, adults and children. Supporting one another is very helpful at this stage.

Shortly after the death, children at any age will need extra care and support from the family around. Sudden death may leave the child feeling angry because he did not have the chance to say goodbye to his parent, sibling, grandfather... They may also feel bad or responsible about the loss. It is important to let the child feel loved and listened to.

It is very normal that you feel confused on what is best to do. You should always remember that grieving is normal after the loss of a loved one and no one knows your child more than you do.

2. How honest should I be with my child?

We, as adult, want to protect especially our children from any harm or sadness. However, if we leave our child uncertain or confused about unanswered questions, this will lead to fantasies that may leave him/her more distressed and isolated.

Children and young people need to be given answers in a language they can understand so they can feel part of the family not excluded, which may help them express their feelings and concerns.

3. The word “dead” seems very hard, should I say it?

Using words as “sleeping” or “gone on a journey” or “passed away” leave the child feeling confused and anxious.

Talk to the child honestly and avoid rewording with a language they can understand.

4. How can I help my child to express his/her feelings?

Children and young people do not feel comfortable talking about their feelings under pressure. However, when you share an activity like playing a game or walking the dog for example with your child, it will help him feel more at ease thus, expressing his emotions more easily.

5. My son is out of control, should I discipline him?

Children feel scared facing the loss of a loved one and they may react in a challenging way. Give them the message that their anger is understandable is what they need to hear. However, make it clear that it is not acceptable to hurt themselves or anyone else. Safe ways to relieve anger is bashing cushions; physical exercises, going outside and shout very loudly are examples of ways that can help them.

6. Is it Ok for my child if he sees me upset?

It is important to share your feelings with your child. An expressive parent will help the child express his/her feeling because children learn to grieve from the adults.

On another hand, dealing with your own grief can be hard and overwhelming. It is important to have family or friend support that can take the kids for few hours to give you space to express your grief without having some control around the children.

7. Talking to someone who is not emotionally involved can be helpful for the child ?

A family friend or someone who is able to give the child time is helpful. Teachers at this stage can play an important role since they see the child on daily basis. Follow up with the school and let them be informed about what has happened. Children tend to be very protective to adults they care about; talking to someone else is easier and less stressful.

References:

1. Sori C et.al,2016 “ The therapist’s notebook for children and adolescent”, second edition.
2. Winston’s wish website
3. Child bereavement UK website