

Helping a Child Grieve and Grow

By Carol Luebering

When our firstborn was new, I read a news story about the brutal murder of a child. A mother tiger roared in my soul and, to my astonishment, I realized that I could kill to protect my tiny daughter.

That protective instinct is essential to our children's survival. We baby-proof our homes; we teach the danger of the street and the risk of playing with matches. And, when death suddenly snatches someone a child loves, we naturally want to shield him or her from grief.

But we have already failed. A child learns grief early in life – from us. The baby who wails when a parent leaves is grieving, expressing the awful pain of separation, the same pain which makes adults cry at funerals.

Working Your Way Through

Death has touched a child you love, and you are discovering that you cannot protect the youngster from life's most painful reality. But, just as you eased the crying baby's woe, there are ways you can help now.

Tell the truth. Dead is a harsh word. We avoid its use, saying instead that someone is "gone," "taken," "in heaven," "asleep." But the meaning such words have for a child is very different from the reality at hand. All of them describe something within a youngster's experience – something reversible. People who sleep awaken; people who go away come back, (and, for a child, going to heaven is not very different from going to Denver); one may hope to recover things which are taken.

Explain the physical effects of death in terms your child can understand: The dead do not breathe. They can feel nothing, not even a pinch. They cannot see or hear, move or speak or smile. They feel cool to the touch – all over, not like when you come in from playing in the snow. Their bodies have completely stopped working, like a toy with not batteries.

And, no, we can't go to the store for new batteries. Death's permanence is hard for children to grasp – virtually impossible for a preschooler. You did a good job reassuring the crying baby that you'd be right back, that you always come back. Now you have to teacher the other side of the story, and it may take a lot of repeating. The other side of the story is that death is an inescapable part of life. The lightning bugs in the jar don't move come morning. Flowers grow and bloom and die.

Be honest about your own feelings. They are probably mixed – numbness, sorrow, maybe a little guilt, perhaps relief that a long ordeal has ended, or anger that this life has been snatched from you. Children need to know it's possible to have several feelings at one time. It helps them understand why adults are acting so strangely.

Explain the cause of death as well as you can. Place blame where it belongs: on the very bad sickness or the accident. Admit that we don't always know why things happen, especially if you have the painful task of announcing a suicide. Express your religious beliefs with great care. Adults can speak of God's will because they have struggled with the mysteries of life. But children, whose whole world is ordered by bigger, more powerful people, may perceive God as a great bully.

Should you take a child to the funeral home, the church or the cemetery? Many people say no but leaving a child home offers no protection from separation; taking the child, on the other hand, protects him or her from the powerful force of imagination. The sight of death in a funeral home is both reassuring and honest. The undertaker's skill softens the ravages of disease and erases even terrible disfigurement. At the same time, the waxen stillness of a corpse asserts the difference between being dead and being asleep.

An older child can be offered the choice between going and staying home. Schoolchildren often feel unsure of their social skills and quickly weary of trying to figure out what to say to concerned adults. Offer such a child the reassurance that no one knows the right word. Arrange, if you can, for the company of friends of your child.

Whatever the child's age, good preparation is important. Explain what we do with a body when it doesn't work anymore! We put it in a special box which we then bury or burn. Describe the casket, being sure the child expects it to be only half open (if at all). Tell what services will be held and what will happen at the cemetery. Make allowances for your child's age and attention span; arrange for someone to take the youngster home if things drag on too long.

Address the child's unspoken feelings. Children's feelings are often too outsize to be named or tamed easily. One may act the feelings out in misbehaviour or in play; another may retreat into silence. Still a third will weep inconsolably one minute and act as if nothing has happened the next. Help the child with the inner storm by talking about likely feelings. Sadness is the obvious emotion to expect after a loss, but not the only one.

Fear lurks large. A brush with death leaves us all feeling vulnerable, and children are no exception. The difference is that children are already vulnerable, wholly dependent on the people who care for them. The death of a caregiver raises a lot of practical questions: Who will take care of me? Will we still live in the same place? The details of the answers may need to be worked out over time. What the child needs to know now is that someone will take care of him or her.

Any death brings any array of fears about the imminence of other deaths, including the child's own. These may surface in the months ahead when, for instance, a child whose

brother has died of cancer is bedded down with the flu. Your explanation of the cause of death now (the bad sickness) is the ground you will build on from then. From the beginning you can assure the child that even though we don't know the future, one death is unlikely to be followed soon by others.

A young child's misinterpretations of cause and effect easily lead to guilt feelings. A child may see death as punishment or as fulfillment of a regretted wish. You can lift that burden from small shoulders, because you know that misbehaviour and bad feelings don't cause illness or accidents.

There's probably anger in that inner stew as well. The line between separation and abandonment often blurs in young minds. Things people say reinforce the confusion. Explain that saying Grandpa was "waiting to die" is not the same as saying he was eager to leave a beloved grandchild.

Ensure ongoing support. Losing a loved one is not like losing a baby tooth. Healing takes much longer – perhaps many years. The child you love needs time and support to become the person who looks forward to life and love with trust.

The fact that you love the child makes you a good source of such support. But if your own grief saps your time and energy, reach out to someone else for help: a friend, a relative, a favourite teacher.

In a child's world, few fates are worse than being different. Grieving children are isolated by difference, afraid of classmates' pity but hunger for understanding. They will need someone who will let them express – and relieve – their feelings, someone who will help them sort through their memories.

Take Heart

No, you cannot protect the child you love from the reality of death. It has intruded into his or her life and the child must face the loss. But you can help him or her death with painful feelings and hold fast to the good memories. A wise writer once insisted that only death makes love possible. Because human life is fragile, it is precious; because in individual makes but one appearance on this earth, his or her uniqueness must be cherished. Do you really want to protect a child from discovering the truth?

Books of additional help

For adults:

Children Facing Grief by Jan Romond, St. Meinrad, Indiana, Abbey Press, 1989.

Why Did Daddy Die? Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Parent by Linda Alderman, New York, Pocket Books, 1989.

Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child by Edgar N. Jackson, Boston, Massachusetts, Beacon, 1976.

How It Feels When A Parent Dies by Jill Krementz, New York, New York, Knopf, 1983.

The Seasons of Grief: Helping Children Grow Through Loss by Dr. Donna A. Gaffney, New York, New York, Plume, 1988.

For children:

Books to Help Children Cope with Separation and Loss by Joanne E. Bernstein, New York, New York, R.R. Bowker Co., 1983.

Charlotte's Web by E.B. White, New York, New York, Harper and Row, 1952.

Pop's Secret by Maryann Townsend and Ronnie Stern, Reading, Massachusetts, Addison-Wesley, 1980.

Articles

"When Children Grieve: Helping Them Cope With the Pain" by John Rosemond, Better Homes and Gardens, Des Moines, Iowa, Meredith Corporation, 1988.

"Teacher Children About Death" by Luebering, St. Anthony Messenger, Cincinnati, Ohio, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1988.