



# Children & Grief

## *A Parent's Guide*

When a member of your family or a friend of the family (i.e., teacher, coach, etc.) has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, it is important to integrate the experience with your children so they understand. Often times, a child's fantasies and fears are worse than reality.

- When speaking with your child about a terminal illness use correct medical terms. Don't over explain, but be honest. If the patient has changed in physical appearance, such as noticeable weight loss, explain to the child why this has happened prior to visiting the patient.
- When the patient is in a hospital or nursing home, describe to the child what he or she may see. Offer the choice of a phone call, letter, or drawing if he or she seems reluctant to visit.
- Reassure your child that nothing they did, or did not do, caused the illness. Some children feel guilty for things that have nothing to do with the illness.
- Children are very sensitive to the emotions of adults, and will respond to your emotional status, as much as to the knowledge that the person is very ill.
- Encourage communication. Do not assume lack of questions means lack of interest. Children are more likely to express themselves through art, play, or action rather than words.
- Share your feelings to help your children understand his or her feelings. By sharing, you can reassure your child that it is alright to have certain feelings. Children model coping skills and behavior from adults.
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Children need structure to feel secure during stressful times. They also need to be involved in appropriate ways in order to not feel left out when the focus of the family is on the patient's needs.
- Encourage other family members, friends, and neighbors to provide support and structure for the child when you have to provide care for the patient.
- Do not let the child assume the caretaker role. Some children will try to take care of the parent. Reassure them that there are things that they can do to help, but they are not expected to assume adult responsibilities.
- Communicate with your child's teachers and others about the change in your child's life. They may be able to provide them extra support and personal time.
- Children cope best by understanding. Providing some of the answers will prepare your child for the changes occurring in his or her life.
- A Social Worker who is trained in dealing with grief can help provide families information on helping your child based on their developmental stage. They can also help by allowing the children to ask emotionally sensitive questions they might be afraid to ask from family members because of the fear of making someone upset.

## *Psychological Tasks of Childhood/Adolescent Grief*



1. Accept the reality of the death.
2. Experience the pain of the death.
3. Adjust to the environment in which the deceased is missing.
4. Relocate the deceased within one's life and find ways to memorialize the person.

Adapted from J. William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning

## *Common Factors That Complicate Grief in Children*

1. Adults' inability to mourn.
2. Instability of family life after death.
3. Prior experience with loss or death.
4. Making the child a confidant.
5. Keeping a child from the funeral.
6. Number of children in the family.

Adapted from Children & Grief: When A Parent Dies. J. William Worden, Ph D. and When A Student Dies: A School Mourns, Ralph A. Klicker.

## *Additional Resources*

### **Books for Children:**

- Clifton, Lucille. **Everett Anderson's Goodbye** (young boy experiences grief following the death of his father). Ages 3-9, death of a parent.
- Silverman, Caroline. **Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies.** (A workbook style book that is good for journaling and drawing) ages 3-11.
- Brown, Laurie Krasny and Marc Brown. **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death.** (book discusses as causes of death, what death is, and customs around death using cartoon dinosaurs). Ages 5-12.
- Heegaard, Marge. **When Someone Very Special Dies** (workbook format dealing with lifecycle, grief reactions, memories and coping strategies, in Spanish as **Cuando Alguien Muy Especial Muere**). Ages 5-10.
- Schweibert, P. and Deklyen (2006). **Tear Soup.** (Beautifully illustrated book about how grief is different for everyone, each person must create their own "tear soup"). Ages 5-12 and 20+.

### **Books for Teens and Tweens:**

- Gootman, Marilyn. **When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing.** (From first days to after death to the future).
- Hughes, Lynne B. **You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After the Loss of a Parent.** (From the first days to after death to the future).
- Wolfelt, Alan. **Healing Your Grief for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas.**

### **Books for Parents and Adults of Grieving Children and Teens:**

- The Dougy Center (2000, 2004). **35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child.**
- Fitzgerald, Helen. **The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide.** or **The Grieving Teen.**
- Kilcker, Ralph. **A Student Dies, A School Mourns: Dealing with Death and Loss in the School Community.** Brunner-Routledge.
- Rubel, Barbara. **But I Didn't Get to Say Goodbye** (A book for parents and professionals helping child suicide survivors; portions may be read aloud with older children) Griefwork Center Inc, New Jersey.

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