

Helping Children Through Grief

Zusman Hospice Bereavement Support



Always Tell the Truth

Explain what happened and why, using simple direct language. Use the correct words: people die, are dead, were killed. Be sure to provide some information on why the death happened or children may fill in any blanks with creative connections. Children without facts are more likely to blame themselves for causing or contributing to the death.

Remind Them Their Emotions Are Normal

Grief is more than sadness. Adults and children feel anger, fear, confusion, guilt and relief, as well as sadness when someone dies. These feelings are not good or bad. They're just normal. Children, particularly boys, may need to be reminded that tears are normal and healing. Be a good role model as a griever.

Actions & Words: A Guide to Their Feelings

Children, especially young ones, will express a lot of their fear, anger and sadness through behavior. They may be withdrawn, hyperactive, clingy and destructive, and they might feel physically sick sometimes. Many children temporarily regress to how they behaved at a younger age. Actions may be their only way to tell caregivers, "I'm mad, I'm worried, I'm scared, I'm confused, I'm hurt."

Provide Reassurance

Losses increase feelings of vulnerability. Children often want to know who will care for them if their primary caregivers die. Do not be afraid to discuss this openly. With tragic or untimely deaths, children need reassurance that such events are unusual. Children may have increased needs for physical proximity to their caregivers.

Allowing children and teens to say goodbye to the person who died is important in beginning the grieving process.

A memorial service enables them to see how valued and important the person was to others and know that grieving the loss is okay. Before the service, let children know what is going to happen, who will be there, where and when it will take place and why it's important. Children who are prepared are able to make the choice about attending the funeral. Should they choose not to participate, invite them to create their own commemorative ritual or activity for saying goodbye, for example planting a flower or tree, holding a candlelighting ceremony.

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Help Them Understand Adult Behavior

Children may be confused by changes in behavior and the variety of reactions they see in adults around them. Uncle John might be angry, Aunt Jane constantly tearful and Grandpa silent and withdrawn. Children, in particular, need to know that it isn't their behavior that is causing the upset.

Protect Their Rights to Remain Children

Do not allow or encourage children and adolescents to step into adult roles because of the loss. Grieving children need routines, structure and discipline so their world can stay as normal as possible. Children do not lose their need to socialize and have fun. They can be grieving hard one minute and playing hard the next. This does not mean that they do not care. Children want to fit back in as soon as possible.

Allow Them to Participate in Rituals of Saying Goodbye

Funerals are for the whole family. Children should be given the choice of whether they attend services after they have been given very clear, detailed descriptions of what to expect. Smaller children should be included for short periods of time and someone should be available to answer questions and move small children on to their next activity. Children who are not allowed to go to funerals will wonder what was so horrible that they couldn't get to see it or will get the message that they are not important or competent enough to be included.

Know When to Get Help

A question parents often have is, "How do I know if my child needs professional help?" Any kind of extreme behavior is a red flag. These behaviors include suicide threats; serious destructive acts toward people, property or animals; frequent episodes of panic; and drug or alcohol abuse. Other changes that probably warrant evaluation are an inability or unwillingness to socialize, a significant decline in schoolwork, or continued denial that the death happened. Young people also may need assistance if they had a difficult relationship with the person who died. Sometimes there is confusion surrounding the death, such as misinformation, lies or a delay in notification. This may place the young person at risk of coping poorly. Children may need assistance with extremely traumatic deaths. A child who is feeling a sense of responsibility for the death, or events leading to the death, needs individual support.



Grief support is available to you and your loved ones from the Zusman Hospice Bereavement Staff.

We offer support through phone calls, individual counseling and group sessions.

Please contact us at 614-559-0350.

After a death, having choices allows children to grieve in the way that is right for them. If you are a parent, ask your child. And don't assume that what holds true for one child will be the same for another.

Made possible by the Alice & Robert Estrich Fund of The Columbus Foundation.



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