

Children and Grief:
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What is grief

When someone close to us dies, we experience something called grief. You may have heard about grief but are not quite sure what it is all about. Grief can be feelings: anger, sadness, worry, relief, fear, numbness. Or it may be thoughts, such as "Who will take care of me now that my mom died?," "Why do people get cancer?," or "What will happen next?" Sometimes, grief affects our bodies. We feel sleepy, or have trouble falling asleep. We may not feel like eating. We may have headaches or stomachaches or all of a sudden don't feel like doing things we usually like to do, such as playing or going to school. All of these experiences are normal for grieving kids.

You might have wondered: will I ever get over this? There is no magic pill for grief. It's not something you "get over." A lot of people say grief is like a journey. Although it never ends, things do get better, and there are things you can do to smooth over the rough and rocky places along the way.

Every kid grieves differently. There are no right or wrong ways to grieve. There are, however, some helpful things and not-so-helpful things you can do while you're grieving. We hope that this site will be a safe place where you can learn from other children about what helps.

Talking to Children

The 117th Boston Marathon kicked off with 26 seconds of silence in tribute to the 20 children and 6 adults murdered in Newtown, Connecticut just four months prior. No one could have predicted the tragic outcome four hours later at the Finish Line, as everyday runners swarmed into the embraces of their loving family and friends. Among those eager supporters was 8-year-old Martin Richard, tragically killed in the first bomb explosion, another casualty of yet another senseless public mass murder.

The Boston Marathon bombings join the long and growing list of large-scale attacks and murders on American soil. We're justified in asking how these collective events will influence the psyches of our youth, and just what, exactly, to say to them.

What do we tell our children? How do we reassure them of their own safety?

At The Dougy Center in Portland, Oregon, we've provided grief support groups for children, teens, young adults and their parents or adult caregivers since 1982. In 1988 we started our first "Healing After a Violent Death or Murder" group, and sadly, have seen the numbers of children and youth impacted by violent death grow over these decades. We were called in to respond in communities after the Thurston High school murders, following 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Newtown, Connecticut murders, and to countless local and national man-made tragedies where children died, witnessed murders, or lost their own family members to violence. We've advised the FBI's Rapid Deployment Team and the National Transportation Safety Board's Family Assistance Program, two important programs detailing the best practices and procedures for responding to the needs of children and families reeling from the deaths of loved ones in mass casualties.

Based on our experience, here are some things for adults to keep in mind as you struggle with how to talk with children following these tragic events:

1. Don't project your fears onto your children. They take their cues from the adults around them.

You can't hear the news about children being murdered without thinking about how you'd feel if they were your children, your grandchildren, your neighbors. The outpouring of care and empathy for the families who lost loved ones will be powerful, and...we all know it could have been our friends, our child, our family members who died or were injured.

Identifying with the senselessness and randomness makes us all feel more vulnerable. But we should remember that children don't always see things the same way that adults do, and it won't be helpful to them for us to fall apart. They need to see that we care, that we feel terrible about this tragedy, and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. They will take their cues from our behavior.

It's okay to show emotion. We ought to model to children that feeling sad and upset is normal after tragedies. But we don't want to overwhelm them with our emotions, or put them in the position of having to parent the adults around them. Make sure you also model taking care of yourself, by sharing with trusted and supportive adult friends, eating (and drinking) healthfully.

2. Try to limit their access to the recurring news and exposure to the tragedy over and over.

Over-exposure to the graphic and emotional news can be overwhelming for children. Some children who repeatedly watched the footage of planes crashing into the towers on 9/11 thought it was happening again and again. Some children (and some adults) may have difficulty getting graphic scenes and images out of their minds. Too much

exposure can fuel their fear, so don't let them sit and watch the news over and over. Better yet, set the example of not doing so yourself as well.

3. Understand that you can't completely shield them from what happened.

It would be next to impossible to hide these events from children, as much as we wish we could. You might be able to shield your own child in your home, for example, by not turning on (or owning) a television, but you can't protect your children from hearing about it from other kids. The fact is, they will hear about it, so although they don't "need" to know about it, pretending we can shield them is magical thinking.

That said, you don't need to give them more information than they can handle, or more than they're asking for. A simple, "Did they talk about what happened in _____ today at school?" would be a good starter. They need to know that you're not trying to hide the truth from them, that you're open to talking about it, but that you're also not forcing them to do so.

4. Model truth-telling and build trust with your children by letting them hear things, even hard things, from you directly.

Eight days after the 9/11 attacks, I was meeting in small groups with pre-school workers in New York City, talking about how to respond to the young children in their care about the events. A man asked to speak to me privately after one of the trainings, and asked for my advice around his 7-year-old daughter. For the last week, since September 12th, she had been having stomachaches and difficulty sleeping. He said it was not tied to the events of 9/11 because "we don't have a television." As his story unfolded it was evident that he did not want to have to explain to his child why people would do such horrible things, a normal dilemma that we face as parents and adults. This child was experiencing physical reactions, as it turned out, not primarily because of her reaction to the events of 9/11, but because she was unable to share her fears and concerns and questions in her own home, faced with her parents' denial.

Here are some principles to keep in mind as you talk with children:

1. There is no one typical reaction one can or should expect from children.

Their responses will vary all over the map, from seeming disinterest to nightmares, eating issues and panic attacks. How any specific child will respond will depend on their age, previous experience with death and loss, their personality style. (Fearful children will tend to worry; quiet children may keep their feelings to themselves; those who want to appear unfazed may evidence a sense of bravado or lack of caring). Of course, children directly affected – those who had a family member die; those who witnessed the carnage; those who had friends die – will tend to have longer-term reactions and

needs. Watch for changes in behavior, or concerning trends. While it would be normal to have heightened anxiety and sleeplessness, any concerning behavior or troubling symptoms should be taken seriously, and if warranted, professional help sought.

2. Many children will have an increased sense of fear about their safety.

Understandably. So will many adults. After a shooting at an Oregon mall in December 2012, the news outlets were filled with people who said they'd never take their children there again. Others said they'd return as soon as it opened in order to support the stores and employees who had experienced the traumatic events, and whose livelihoods were going to suffer as a result of the several day closure. Some runners in the Boston Marathon vowed to return; others said they would never do so again.

While we can't guarantee to our children that nothing bad will ever happen to them, we can provide assurance that these events are relatively rare, and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Of course, the parents of the children at Sandy Hook Elementary School could never have imagined or foreseen the day that unfolded for their children. We've had to digest the reality that children in school, shoppers at a mall, runners in a marathon, have all been targeted. What makes these murders even more terrifying is that they highlight not only that it can happen anywhere, but that it has happened, in several pretty normal, ordinarily safe places.

3. Children want, need, and deserve the truth.

In over 30 years of providing grief support to thousands of children and teens, we have never heard a child say, "I'm glad I was lied to." Many, however, struggle with anger and lack of trust toward parents or other adults who lied to them. When we don't tell the truth, they learn that we cannot be trusted. As difficult as it can be at times, and as horrendous as the truth may be, children want, need, and deserve the truth.

As we cope with trying to come to terms with the horror and terror of these murders, how to explain such things to our children and keep them safe, let us not forget the families and friends of those killed. They have long, difficult and lonely journeys ahead. Their lives truly will never be the same. They need our support, not just in these initial days of shock and disbelief, but long-term, long after the funerals are over, the tuna casseroles consumed, and the rest of the world has moved on.

When a loved one dies, it can be difficult to know how to help kids cope with the loss, particularly as you work through your own grief.

How much kids can understand about death depends largely on their age, life experiences, and personality. But there are a few important points to remember in all cases.

Explaining Death in a Child's Terms

Be honest with kids and encourage questions. This can be hard because you may not have all of the answers. But it's important to create an atmosphere of comfort and openness, and send the message that there's no one right or wrong way to feel. You might also share any spiritual beliefs you have about death.

A child's capacity to understand death — and your approach to discussing it — will vary according to the child's age. Each child is unique, but here are some rough guidelines to keep in mind.

Until kids are about 5 or 6 years old, their view of the world is very literal. So explain the death in basic and concrete terms. If the loved one was ill or elderly, for example, you might explain that the person's body wasn't working anymore and the doctors couldn't fix it. If someone dies suddenly, like in an accident, you might explain what happened — that because of this very sad event, the person's body stopped working. You may have to explain that "dying" or "dead" means that the body stopped working.

Kids this young often have a hard time understanding that all people and living things eventually die, and that it's final and they won't come back. So even after you've explained this, kids may continue to ask where the loved one is or when the person is returning. As frustrating as this can be, continue to calmly reiterate that the person has died and can't come back.

Avoid using euphemisms, such as telling kids that the loved one "went away" or "went to sleep" or even that your family "lost" the person. Because young kids think so literally, such phrases might inadvertently make them afraid to go to sleep or fearful whenever someone goes away.

Also remember that kids' questions may sound much deeper than they actually are. For example, a 5-year-old who asks where someone who died is now probably isn't asking whether there's an afterlife. Rather, kids might be satisfied hearing that someone who died is now in the cemetery. This may also be a time to share your beliefs about an afterlife or heaven if that is part of your belief system.

Kids from the ages of about 6 to 10 start to grasp the finality of death, even if they don't understand that it will happen to every living thing one day. A 9-year-old might think, for example, that by behaving or making a wish, grandma won't die. Often, kids this age

personify death and think of it as the "boogeyman" or a ghost or a skeleton. They deal best with death when given accurate, simple, clear, and honest explanations about what happened.

As kids mature into teens, they start to understand that every human being eventually dies, regardless of grades, behavior, wishes, or anything they try to do.

As your teen's understanding about death evolves, questions may naturally come up about mortality and vulnerability. For example, if your 16-year-old's friend dies in a car accident, your teen might be reluctant to get behind the wheel or even ride in a car for awhile. The best way to respond is to empathize about how frightening and sad this accident was. It's also a good time to remind your teen about ways to stay safe and healthy, like never getting in a car with a driver who has been drinking and always wearing a seatbelt.

Teens also tend to search more for meaning in the death of someone close to them. A teen who asks why someone had to die probably isn't looking for literal answers, but starting to explore the idea of the meaning of life. Teens also tend to experience some guilt, particularly if one of their peers died. Whatever your teen is experiencing, the best thing you can do is to encourage the expression and sharing of grief.

And if you need help, many resources — from books to counselors to community organizations — can provide guidance. Your efforts will go a long way in helping your child get through this difficult time — and through the inevitable losses and tough times that come later in life.

Mourning the Loss

Is it right to take kids to funerals? It's up to you and your child. It's appropriate to let kids take part in any mourning ritual — if they want to. First explain what happens at a funeral or memorial and give kids the choice of whether to go.

What do you tell a young child about the funeral? You may want to explain that the body of the person who died is going to be in a casket, and that the person won't be able to talk or see or hear anything. Explain that others may speak about the person who died and that some mourners may be crying.

Share any spiritual beliefs you have about death and explain the meaning of the mourning rituals that you and your family will observe.

If you think your own grief might prevent you from helping your child at this difficult time, ask a friend or family member to care for and focus on your child during the service. Choose someone you both like and trust who won't mind leaving the funeral if your child wants to go.

Many parents worry about letting their kids witness their own grief, pain, and tears about a death. Don't — allowing your child to see your pain shows that crying is a natural reaction to emotional pain and loss. And it can make kids more comfortable sharing their feelings. But it's also important to convey that no matter how sad you may feel, you'll still be able to care for your family and make your child feel safe.

Getting More Help

As kids learn how to deal with death, they need space, understanding, and patience to grieve in their own way.

They might not show grief as an adult would. A young child might not cry or might react to the news by acting out or becoming hyperactive. A teen might act annoyed and might feel more comfortable confiding in peers. Whatever their reaction, don't take it personally. Remember that learning how to deal with grief is like coping with other physical, mental, and emotional tasks — it's a process.

Nevertheless, watch for any signs that kids need help coping with a loss. If a child's behavior changes radically — for example, a gregarious and easygoing child becomes angry, withdrawn, or extremely anxious; or goes from having straight A's to D's in school — seek help.

A doctor, school guidance counselor, or mental health organization can provide assistance and recommendations. Also look for books, websites, support groups, and other resources that help people manage grief.

Parents can't always shield kids from sadness and losses. But helping them learn to cope with them builds emotional resources they can rely on throughout life.