

How to Help Children Cope with Grief and Loss

Grief is a process that everyone goes through when they experience a loss. Most of us normally think of loss as the death of a loved one. However, loss can also include life changes such as divorce, moving to a different neighborhood or the death of a pet.

Adults may find it difficult to help a child through the stages of grief. As guardians some may be dealing with the loss themselves. Adults often try to protect children from knowledge of disaster and pain. However, children sense all of these feelings. Sometimes they also get the message that it's not okay to ask about them.

It's important to understand a child's behavior when they are grieving. This can help you know how to help children through the grieving process.

How do children grieve?

Children may grieve differently from adults. Age can impact the way a child understands a loss and how they grieve. The following are some signs that a child may be grieving.

- Sudden change in appetite
- Weight loss
- Problems with sleeping
- Problems with bowel or bladder control
- Fears of being lonely or abandoned
- Temper tantrums
- Aggressive behavior
- Lack of interest in activities that they once enjoyed
- Anger, guilt or shame
- Withdrawing from others
- Unresponsive
- Trouble concentrating
- Doesn't want to go to school

What can I do to help?

Be honest

Give simple and honest information about the loss. For example, if a loved one passed away try to avoid telling your child that the individual “went to sleep.” This can confuse a child because they may think eventually they will wake up. Another way of explaining death is to tell the child that the body stopped working.

Talk openly

One of the most important needs after a loss is to talk about the event as much as you can. Try to be supportive and understanding. Don't try to make it okay and fix the sadness they may feel. Grief is a normal reaction to loss.

Listen

Children may ask many questions about the loss. Listen to all their questions and try to answer their questions in a way they will understand. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't try to make up an answer. Tell them you do not know the answer.

Explore feelings

Ask the child about their fears, thoughts and worries. Allow them to express all the emotions they're feeling. Let your child know that what they're feeling is normal. Very young children may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings. Activities such as drawing or playacting may help them express what they're feeling. Help them name their feelings.

Respect feelings

If they don't want to talk about the loss right away, give them time. Like adults, children grieve at their own pace. You may want to consider different ways to approach the topic. You could bring up favorite memories they had or do an activity that may remind them of the loss.

Be a good role model

You may also be dealing with the loss. Keep in mind that children may pick up on how you deal with the situation and act the same way. The way you handle the situation may not be the best way for a child to handle the situation. You may also want to ask a close family member or friend to talk with your child.

Sometimes, no matter what steps you take to help your child through the grieving process, you may find that it's simply not working. Take a closer look at your child's behavior – is there a more serious issue they are dealing with that you can't handle on your own? Don't be afraid to get professional help for your child if necessary.

References

- Ehmke, R. (n.d.) Helping Children Deal with Grief. Retrieved May 6, 2021 from <https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>
- Morin, A. (2021) Signs of Grief in Children and How to Help Them Cope. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellfamily.com/signs-of-grief-in-children-and-how-to-help-them-cope-4174245>