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# Helping Children Cope with Grief

*Adapted from the original by Dr. Bill Webster*

Children have many questions about death, and they deserve simple, straightforward answers. A grieving child must make sense of how the loss occurred and a direct, concrete explanation of the facts surrounding the death will help them begin to come to terms with what has happened. They may ask to hear these facts a number of times, and they may want to share the story with friends, teachers, even strangers, trying to comprehend the unimaginable.

Children may express themselves in a variety of ways after a loss, including an apparent lack of feelings, acting out, regressive behavior and other explosive emotions. Children are often afraid that someone else in the family, or they themselves, will die also. Every child is afraid of being abandoned, so if one parent has died, the remaining parent can assure the child that he/she expects to live a long time and will take care of all the child's needs.

Simple ceremonies can be effective: lighting a candle next to a photograph; placing a letter, picture or special memento in a casket; or releasing a helium balloon with a message attached for the person who died can be effective rituals of farewell. Children can be wonderfully creative with these kinds of meaningful, symbolic ideas. Often a child may benefit from a support program. Talk to your doctor, spiritual leader or other community resource people to see what programs are available for your children.

## *A few practical guidelines:*

- Initiate the conversation. Children may not ask questions because they are not sure if they will upset us adults.
- When describing the death of a loved one, use simple, direct language.
- Be honest. Never teach a child something they will later have to unlearn.
- Allow children to express all their emotions.
- Listen to children, don't just talk to them.
- Don't expect the child to react immediately. Be patient and available.
- Understand your own adult feelings about death and grief, for until we have come to terms with it for ourselves, it will be difficult to convey a positive attitude to children.

Above all, let the child know that these feelings of grief are natural and a necessary part of the grieving process and that their grief will pass. Assure them they are not alone, and that others, including you yourself, feel sad as well. Assure the child, however, that these feelings will pass with time, and that life will return to normal. ■



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