

Helping children after a death

This article specifically addresses ways to help young children after a death of someone close to them. However the principles are the same for any loss, for older children, even ourselves, if they are adapted accordingly.

Meeting the child's needs

Young children experience a death of a major caregiver as abandonment. In the period of shock after a sudden death or in the grief and disruption of death from a longer illness, whether in or outside the family, where parents are distracted by grief and other responsibilities, children are also at risk of feeling 'abandoned' by their parents. At such times it is particularly urgent that the child's physical and emotional needs should continue to be met, if possible by someone whom the child knows and loves.

Consider the following:

- Keep in place the familiar daily routines, which provide order and predictability for the child. Consider waking, preparing for the day, mealtimes, sharing times, bedtimes etc. These routines also carry the adults in crises!
- Try to keep the diet healthy. Grief brings lowered immune response, especially after 4-6 weeks.
- Sleep— children may need extra help to get to sleep. Foot massage with lavender oil, before sleep helps. Also guided visualisations to a quiet peaceful place can help with relaxation and sleep.
- Make sure that normal rules and boundaries are adhered to. This helps the child to feel safer in a more chaotic emotional environment. It helps if carers can centre themselves and slow down if necessary, then be firm, clear and consequent, as well as gentle and loving.
- Provide physical and emotional warmth. Grief can create feelings of inner and outer cold.
- Cut down on unnecessary stimulation, noise and 'screen' time.
- Give the child time and try not to hurry the child as this increases stress.
- Try to include the child in what is going on in the family (appropriate to the age of course). To remove the child from the home while the family recovers from a loss, re-organises themselves, is perceived by the child also as a sort of abandonment. See section on adjustment.
- Make sure there is time for healthy outside and inside play. Water, sand play and big play, like cubby building, can help to dissipate angry feelings. 'Helping' with challenging physical tasks like digging, hammering, carrying heavy things, wood and shopping can give anger 'something to do.'
- Provide creative activities like play dough, modelling, painting and drawing. All these can give expression to feelings and also give adults clues to where a child may have misconceived ideas or where problems might lie.

Telling the child about the death

With very young children it is best to be **simple, direct and brief and be led by their questions on whether to say more**. It will take some time for them to be able to understand the basic principles behind the concept of death: death's permanence, its universality for all living creatures and its non-functionality, that is, that everything in the body stops. Young children need repetition of these principles until they come to understand them completely (usually after seven years.)

It is important to discriminate in language between what is ordinary and every day and what is so extreme it causes death. It is important to be clear and honest about what led to the death, for example "He was driving home in the dark and didn't see the oil on the road, and even though he tried to straighten the car..." but also to reassure them that this does not happen often and is not likely to happen to the child or the family again. It is suggested that the heavily emphasised 'very, very, very, very ...'

Misconceptions about death in young children

For children with so little experience of the world, it is easy for them to have misunderstandings about death. Their misconceptions can be observed in their talk, in their play and in their creations, paintings, drawings, and modelling and in their responses to questions about how they see things.

Causes of death. Children need help to discriminate between the ordinary and exceptional in relation to harm to the body causing death. (See above very, very, very, very...!))

Death as sleep. Young children often think of death in terms of sleep, so it is confusing to say

be used in relation to anything resulting in death. 'Very, very, very, very ill' ... in terminal illness; 'very, very, very, very old' in terms of old age; 'very, very, very, very hurt' in terms of accident, 'very, very, very, very sad and ill' in terms of suicide. Reassurance is also needed that just being tired or sick or old or sad cannot make you die.

Spirit versus body. The picture of death which the child seems to have an intuitive understanding of is that we have a spiritual self (the 'I' that the child delights in the discovery of in their third year, 'I am I!', the indestructible 'I') which lives inside a physical body. When that physical body is too old or sick or damaged to hold us any more, it dies and the spiritual part of us goes to where that part of us lives when it is not in an earthly body. It is as if we take off our old, worn out, useless coat, put it down, and move on without it. As one small child put it, on looking at the dead body of her old dog; "I can see he isn't there. But how did he get out?"

that a loved one is 'asleep now' or 'put to sleep' in terms of an animal. The logical question will come then: 'When are they going to wake up?' They can also have fears about themselves or others going to sleep if death is seen as sleep.

Death as gone away. Similarly the child is confused by 'gone away'. 'When will they come back?' This may create fear of another loved one going away on a trip, or they themselves going away on a holiday. Behavioural reluctances can be signs of such misunderstandings— real panic at the talk of a parent going away etc.

Logic gone wild. The child will try to make sense of the circumstances of a death and with

their lack of experience and literal logic they may come to wrong conclusions. So grandma died in hospital, mother's friend died in hospital, thus hospitals or doctors kill people... thus they are frightening places!! Similarly they may fear that people die from not sleeping, from eating or not eating something, or from not wearing a coat.

Self blame. The most serious misconception is the belief that someone died from some

The right to mourn

Children, like adults need to mourn a loss. If they are denied this they will have to repress their grief and this can cause deeper problems later. The pain of personal loss is a great teacher about life and compassion and while it is difficult to watch in children, it is definitely an opportunity for growth. The loss of a beloved pet or a beloved doll can be a teacher of greater things and should not be denied by hurrying or quick replacement to make the adult feel better.

However the child's personal loss and grief is different from exposing the child to the tragedies of the world and other people before they are emotionally mature to cope with it. This distinction cannot be emphasised enough.

Sometimes it is inevitable that a child will hear about tragedies in the community - for example, about deaths in a local bushfire or road accident. We have also learnt sometimes that world tragedies have such a great impact on us as adults, we have been unable to protect our children from them, because even if we personally have, the news will come from other children - so we saw with 9/11 and the Asian tsunami. These tragedies can also teach our children about how we as adults deal with death, but we would not wish to impose such lessons on our children too often.

consequence of the child's behaviour. This last tendency to blame themselves is very powerful in children under seven years (indeed such self blame continues into adulthood on some instinctive level). Such blame needs to be recognised and corrected. So the child may think his sister died because he refused to help her carry in the wood, or father died because the child was naughty, or grandma died because on her last visit, he would not kiss her goodbye.

It is sobering to think how relatively protected we are in Australia from death, especially when we consider that many in our multicultural community have borne tragedies in their countries of origin almost beyond our comprehension.

What supports children in their grief?

Listening. Helping children to talk about their loss gives them an outlet for their feelings. It is useful and healthy (if initially painful) to talk about the person, animal, object lost to them. It helps to talk about what the person was like, what they did for us, what we enjoyed about them, what we were grateful for. Saying thank you for all that is a way even a small child can 'do' something in their loss.

Helping the child to find something to do with their feelings. Finding the way to acknowledge and do something for the person or animal who has died helps us to move on through the grief of loss. Children can do simple things which represent a symbolic thank you: making a drawing or painting, picking some flowers, putting up a photo and lighting a candle, then singing a little song or saying a rhyme. Creativity helps the heart to speak and heal.

The gift of tears. Crying helps to 'let the sadness out'. This is a good concept to share

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with children. It is literally true, because the chemicals in the body released in grief flow out of the body through the tears. It is healthy for adults to be able to weep with a child as long as it is not so intense for the adult that the child experiences the adult as out of control. The lesson we want the child to learn is that it is healthy to cry the sadness out but at some point we stop crying to get on with what needs to be done next. That way they still feel safe in our care.

Children do not mourn all at once. If it is all too much or simply because they are children, they

Moving on

When someone dies we can help children adjust to the changed circumstances, by rebuilding the relationship with the dead person in a new way. The most natural way to do this with young children is through the idea of a continuing human spirit. This may be difficult for some people, but certainly not all.

From the 2006 Australian Census it seems that 69% of Australians claim a religious affiliation (Christian except for 6% other religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism). Of the remaining 31%, some 19% claim no religion, with the rest unidentified as to their beliefs. In the 18-24 year old age bracket, the census showed 55% claim Christianity as their religion. From this one might assume that many people have some belief, however tentative, in the existence and continuity of the human spirit. Children under seven years are certainly hard to convince otherwise. They can hardly conceive of 'not being'.

Building a new relationship

Recent work in bereavement sometimes talks about building a new relationship with the dead person. They are no longer with us in the

will be sad and then they will be happy and play. The important thing as adults is to follow their lead, to remember play is to be encouraged and that the sadness may come back at times and then they will need loving support again. Children's ability to get on with life and laugh and play again during bereavement is sometimes the gift of a breathing space for adults too, if only the adult can enter the child's world for a time. It also needs to be made clear that it is alright to be happy and laugh and play, even when we are sad in another part of our heart.

Many texts on grief talk about the continuance of the dead person through other people's memories. That notion everyone can work with. They speak less of the spiritual path.

However, given that young children and a large proportion of adults have a natural tendency to believe in an ongoing spiritual existence, I am choosing to work with that in these suggestions for helping children to cope with death. Those who do not believe in an on-going spirit may need to interpret the following suggestions a little differently. It is important to be truthful with children, for they sense the truth whether you tell it or not. However it is possible to honestly use other authorities (e.g. 'My grandmother believed that...', 'I know a person who believes that...') to broaden children's beliefs and comfort options in regard to the dead.

physical body which has mostly in some way been given back to the earth (ashes to ashes); however it may well be that the dead are in fact

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with us in some way, apart from our memories. Children can be very comfortable with this if it is done in the right way, not some macabre way. They accept that the dead's love can still be with us, that we can share our thoughts with the dead. Many bereaved people talk about the reassurances that their dead have communicated to them, even in just communicating the feeling 'I'm okay here. Everything is okay.'

So whether you are working with memories or some more substantial belief in the spirit, it is helpful and healing to pick up the threads of life again, acknowledging, not denying, the dead. Here are some ways to consider:

Creating a special place at home to remember them. In the months following the death, it is possible to make a special place where the family can remember the dead in the house, perhaps a shelf or little table, where there can be a picture of the dead person with the family or child, or a candle, or beautiful things the children find on their walks to decorate it – shells, pine cones, flowers from the garden or roadside. While this is painful initially, such openness and recognition brings healing. It also helps others to see it is okay to talk about the dead person in your house.

Memorabilia. Going through and dealing with a dead person's belonging can be incredibly painful and is part of the necessary coming to terms with their being physically gone. It is tempting to either just leave everything as it is, like a shrine, or get rid of everything fast. But for a young child there is a better way, and that is to bring some of their belongings into a new perspective, a new place, a new purpose. Giving a child a photo or other memorabilia of the dead person to have in his room can help the development of a different relationship to the dead – where his memory can be integrated into everyday living again. "I'm sure Daddy would

love you to have his golf trophy/his soccer ball." "Would you like Daddy's favourite shirt?" For a child to wear his father's T-shirt can be healing – it surrounds him with his 'Dad' in the way once, physically, his Dad would surround him in a hug, and now, we hope, his dad's love still surrounds him.

Including the dead's name in conversation. In everyday talk, one can naturally include mention of the dead person – not just from the past but also if you wish, in the present, "Daddy would have loved this..." but also "He must be so glad to see you playing so happily. He wouldn't want you to be too sad all the time." "Shall we use Daddy's plate for this? He doesn't need it any more but we sure do." This way the dead are physically gone but still can go on having a place in our hearts and in our living.

Having others acknowledge the dead for the child. There can be a dreadful silence about a dead person after a death, where visitors sometimes feel they cannot mention his or her name. It is helpful to children (and adults) for other people to talk about the dead person, naturally, in positive ways. "Hey, I see you are pretty good at throwing that ball! Your Dad loved throwing balls too. I remember when he and I..." "I miss your Dad. He always made me laugh. Maybe we should do something funny to make him laugh."

Anniversaries and celebrations. Some of the most painful times for a child are at Christmas and birthdays (even if this might manifest most in lack of the dead one's present!) and these are hard times for adults too. However anniversaries can also be planned to include the memory of the loved one, to talk about them. Anniversaries of the actual date of death or birthday can be far more specific to the dead person and celebratory. ("It's her birthday today. Let's make her favourite cake and eat it

for her.”) One can share about how things have changed since the person died. Anniversaries can have unusual power, perhaps because we hold memories in our bodies which are

Therapeutic stories

Stories can be healing for adults and children alike. Therapeutic stories can be created to tell children how life is going to unfold, what the new way will look like perhaps...what strengths they will need on the way, and how to find it... Stories can be used to create the pathway to and through the great unknown, a scary thought for small children.

- One can use stories to reaffirm the idea of the cyclical nature of life – a metaphor for life and death and rebirth: a story of a rain drop forming from the mist above the river, travelling a long way, coming down again from a cloud, as rain, being washed to the ocean and once again becoming mist and raindrop. Or the story of the butterfly, beginning as a grub turning into a chrysalis, and through remarkable transformation

triggered by the passing of time and the seasons. Children may sense this too so we should be ready for this.

becoming a butterfly free to fly with the breeze.

- Biographical metaphors for life and death can be created in stories... The picture of the knight who, weary with battle, must take off his now useless armour to cross the rainbow bridge to the green fields beyond...etc
- Biographical metaphors for separation and divorce, can be created in stories: where two characters walk different roads, come together to share the one path and then the road forks again and one must go one way and the other character the other way BUT between the roads and the new houses, with all their differences, along the roads, is a beautiful path along which the children can walk from house to house...so they now have two homes, two special places where they can be...etc.

Other Dangers

Expectations of children

We need to be careful that adult responsibility is not put onto, or taken on, by the child. One sometimes hears well-meaning relatives say to a boy, “Well, you will have to be the man of the house now.” A disastrous message for a child. Children need to be reassured that they can *be* children and will be taken care of.

Collapse of support for the family

We also have to watch for the collapse of support for the child due to adult grief—we

may sometimes need to get help for the adult and sometimes bring in extra support for the child too. Help to keep the home functioning as normally as possible, can sometimes be done by friends doing some tasks to free the parents to be with the children. Food can be prepared, clothes can be taken away and washed, houses can be cleaned discretely, gardens weeded and watered and so on. Sometimes the most help is needed in the months following a death, when other support has fallen away, when those closest to the bereaved family are feeling exhausted and wanting to get back to their own

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lives, and when the protective chemicals of grief are wearing off in the bereaved and the reality of the loss is hitting hard. Then friends outside the inner circle might be needed for support.

Teachers too may need to watch for this need for more help for the bereaved family of a child in their class.

Summary

There are many ways to work with children after a death or a loss. It need not be hidden from them. But it does need understanding of their stage of development and their needs. On the one hand, life needs to be kept going as normally as possible, with good food, regular bedtimes and routines, laughter and sadness, with particular attention being paid to their emotional needs, when their normal carers are distressed and disoriented. On the other hand we can also work to build a new relationship with the one who has died, acknowledging that while they are gone physically, their love may still be around the child. This takes mindfulness, care and perhaps courage as well. It can be a rich experience for everyone involved. Just as one can have a good death, one can have a good grieving.

Other articles of interest on the website

Understanding the effects of loss and grief