

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DEATH – NOTES FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

When children have been affected by the death of someone close to them we often find it hard to know what to say or do. What follows are some practical ideas of how to help children cope in these difficult circumstances, as well as some information which may help you to understand how loss may affect children.

WE ALWAYS COMMUNICATE – IT IS IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO

At any time children are sensitive to communication in many forms. In our body language, in our tone of voice, in what we say and in what we do. At stressful or traumatic times it is likely that children will be more anxious to know what is happening and what kind of emotions other people are feeling.

Here are some thoughts about how we can communicate effectively and helpfully with children.

GIVE TIME AND SPACE FOR TALKING

As soon as possible after the death, set time aside to talk to the child. It may be that you yourself may be too upset at some point to answer a child's questions. If this happens it may help to consider one of two options. One: if someone else who has a good relationship with the child is available, ask him or her to step in and address these questions. Alternatively, you could let your child know that you do not feel able to talk about this right now but that you will make a later time to address this question and any others. If you find that you cannot talk at any time it is important to reassure the child that it is your feelings you are struggling with not the child. It is helpful if you are open about not knowing something.

Give information about what has happened in a simple manner. Usually children ask questions as they want to know more. It sometimes helps to clarify exactly what they are asking. Be prepared to repeatedly answer the same or similar questions: it sometimes may take a period of time for things to become clear to a child. They may need to come back to questions in the future as they mature and their understanding increases.

Use appropriate language for the age and comprehension level of a child (see later notes for some general guides to this).

Use accurate language and use the name of the deceased when speaking about him or her. For instance, "John has died" or is "dead". Avoid using phrases that may cause confusion or misunderstanding such as "He's gone to Jesus" (may be angry at Jesus or anxious if you go anywhere) or "He's sleeping" (may fear sleep and suffer sleep disturbance). It is important to talk about death in a way that helps the child to understand that death is permanent.

HELPING CHILDREN TO UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE

Sometimes it may help for you to ask questions. These may be initiated by you or be in response to a question your child has asked. For instance, if a child has asked you something about the death, it may help to clarify what they want to know by saying "What do you think happened?" or "Have you heard anything about that from someone else?". Or at another time you might ask, "I wonder how you are feeling?".

Invite questions from the child. Suggest the child comes back to you if s/he has any more questions or hears anything that concerns them.

BE OPEN ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE

This does not mean you should share everything about your own thoughts and feelings. However, you are a useful model for your child. If you acknowledge a range of feelings and thoughts it will help them to know that it is OK for them to feel them too. Often you may want to share your experience in a simplified way. For instance, "It really hurts when I think of Daddy having died. I miss him so much."

When we are bereaved of someone close it often seems that our feelings are so intense that they may overwhelm us. Bereaved adults and children often find themselves wondering if they are going crazy because of the strength of their feelings and thoughts, which may be quite unlike those experienced previously. Sometimes we can become fearful of the strength of these feelings and try to avoid them. This may lead to feelings being 'bottled up' or held inside our bodies. The effect of trying to hold back a feeling is that it seems to grow and may become more frightening. In our experience we find that people are often surprised by what happens when they 'let go' and allow themselves to feel fully. For example, many people think "If I let myself cry I would never stop", in practice they find that when they do cry, after a length of time (usually a matter of minutes), the tears naturally stop. In general our culture has not encouraged us to feel free and comfortable with any feelings, especially some of the common feelings associated with grief, like sadness and anger. It provides a good model for bereaved children if adults are open about their feelings and expressing them.

Having said this, there may still be circumstances where it is appropriate to be selective about what you share with a child; for instance where you feel guilty or angry and blaming. It may not be useful to talk about all the thoughts you have associated with these feelings, but acknowledging that you have some guilt and/or anger may help a child to understand any similar feelings they have.

Children will notice how adults cope with their grief and may copy them. It is valuable to give the message that though some feelings may be hard work, they can be handled. Thus messages like "I cannot talk at the moment because I feel so sad right now, but I will make a time to talk with you later" acknowledge the strength of a feeling but also that you will be able to manage it. It may be helpful at different times to acknowledge feelings such as anger, fear, sadness, longing, loneliness, confusion and guilt.

It is important to remember that children may show grief differently from adults and that each person is unique in the way that they grieve. Each member of a family needs to know that their feelings are valued and respected, even if they may be different from others.

LOOK FOR OUTSIDE RESOURCES

You may find it helpful to find books about death from a library or bookshop (note The Laura Centre booklist). The Laura Centre also has a small library for our clients.

Look to see if there may be other supportive friends or relatives your child can turn to. If there is someone who seems appropriate and who your child likes, consider suggesting that they may meet from time to time especially to be able to talk about the death and their feelings.

RITUALS AND ACTIVITIES ASSOCIATED WITH LOSS

The funeral

Before

Talk about the funeral. Explain what happens there and find out if your child wants to attend. Children usually value being given the opportunity to make their own informed decisions about attending the funeral. If the child would like to come and you feel unable to attend to his/her needs you could ask a friend or relative to look after them at the funeral. It is helpful to explain about all the practical aspects of a funeral, including what is involved with burial or cremation. With children it needs to be made clear that a dead body does not feel pain, fear or other physical discomfort.

After

Whether a child attended the funeral or not, it is helpful to check out their thoughts and feelings about it. Is there anything incomplete for them, or anything they did not understand? Maybe there is something else they would like to do to remember the deceased.

Ways of remembering

You or your child may have your own unique and creative way of remembering the deceased. Some ideas depending on the age and personality of your child are: having a special place to keep memories (photos, special objects, letters etc); drawing a picture or writing to the dead person; releasing a balloon with a special message on it; having a place of remembrance that you can visit; having a candle at home to light in

remembrance; creating a memory book where family and friends might write in memories or thoughts about the deceased.

Talk to your child about spiritual matters if appropriate. Be respectful of their personal beliefs. If fitting talk about the separation of spirit and body. Whatever your beliefs it is valuable for the child to know that they can continue their relationship with the deceased in some way. This may mean talking to them in heaven, keeping the memories alive in their heart or mind or in any other way that suits them. Studies have shown that we all need to find ways to acknowledge the strength of feeling we continue to have about people who have died.

Share memories, good and bad, with your child. You may find it valuable to share memories with other friends and family too.

PROVIDE REASSURANCE AND SECURITY WHERE YOU CAN

It helps to keep much of life familiar and safe. Obviously there are often inevitable huge changes following a death, but it can help to provide continuity in areas that do not change. Generally it is helpful to maintain discipline with a child and keep contact with people they liked. Think carefully about any major changes you may make. If you decide to make changes include the child in your thinking, allow them to express how they feel about them. You can acknowledge their feelings without having to change what you decide to do. For instance, "I see that you do not want to move, and feel angry at the thought of living further away from your friends".

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Watch out for "bad dreams" – are they occurring often? Talk about dreams; or draw them, they are a way of discharging distress.

Be aware of any behavioural changes in your child – if they concern you, talk with the teachers, ask if they have noticed any changes at school.

A sudden or traumatic loss often leads to loss of concentration, changes to appetite and sleep patterns and other changes in behaviour. Note these are quite normal in the circumstances but if you feel concerned about anything like this please feel free to telephone the Laura Centre.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

In the past children's experience of death and loss has often been discounted or avoided. We now know that even the youngest children experience feelings of grief when someone in their life dies. Below, you will see some general guidelines to do with children's understanding of death. As with anything like this, please treat these very loosely, each child is different.

In many ways, the feelings children have about death are the same as adults. They too feel sad, angry, scared etc. Sometimes younger children may not recognise these feelings or talk about them. They will be demonstrated in their actions or behaviour.

One thing that people have noticed is that children tend to move in and out of grief quicker than adults. Thus, a child may be crying and full of sadness one moment and happily playing football the next. Someone has described a child's grief as like "stepping in and out of puddles". Though each visit to a 'puddle' may be short, they may spend years (and indeed a lifetime) revisiting their grief and understanding about what a person's death means to them. We have noticed that often a period of development in a child will trigger off new thoughts and questions about a death.

It is common for children of any age to feel responsible for things that have happened. A common question in suicide or even with death from an illness, is "Was it because I was naughty?" Or, "Did that happen because I did not tidy my room?". In younger children this issue can be confused by what has been called 'Magical thinking': this is where a child thinks that something they have said or thought will produce a direct result. For example, "I said I wished my sister was dead, now she has died, I must have caused it".

AGE RELATED GUIDELINES

Toddler – pre-school

An infant's world is largely centred on themselves. At this age they are learning that they are separate from others.

They may experience difficulty understanding about the permanence of death. Similarly it is important to make clear that someone who has died does not feel pain or other physical sensations like heat or cold.

They may think that when you are out of sight, you may not come back. This sometimes leads to their following you wherever you go or clinging behaviour.

They may physically look for the deceased. For example, when a baby had died a toddler may keep looking for him/her in the cot. They may want to dig up the body of the deceased to see them again.

5 – 9 years

It is usually at this age that a child starts to learn about death being “forever”. However, they may still need to questions death’s finality over and over again. They may ask repeated questions about whether the deceased is coming back or where exactly they are now.

As with all children this group often have greatly increased fears about separation from you. These fears, as with older children, may take the form of worrying about the death of other important people in their lives. These fears tend to be at their strongest following the death of a parent, when children worry about how they would live if the remaining parent died. In this case it is helpful if you have planned what would happen if you died and share these plans with your child. It is important to stress how unlikely this event is, but you need to acknowledge that it could happen (a child will already have come to this conclusion, especially if a parent or sibling has died) and help the child to understand that if you did die there would be other people who would look after him or her.

School age children often think of themselves as being ‘different’ from their classmates. This can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration. Sadly, it is common for children to be teased at school by others who may not appreciate the full effects of their comments. If this happens it is important for the school to give a strong lead, so that children know that it is not acceptable to tease someone following a death.

10 years and older

Children of this age will be moving towards understanding death in an adult way.

This is an age when young people often start to think about death and their own eventual death as part of the normal process of development. This process may be much more intense, fearful and painful when someone close has died.

Teenagers may act out their feelings in different ways. It is hard for them to balance the desire for independence, with the vulnerabilities they may feel. They are facing all the usual challenges that teenagers face but at the same time may feel as if the ground has just been taken from under their feet. Sometimes teenagers act in a way that can make it appear as if they do not care. For instance, they may insist on staying out of the house, being with friends or only want to listen to music and use the computer. Often they express a lot of anger and may blame you for how they are feeling. It is important to be patient and know that they may still need your support even if they have a funny way of showing it. You may find that there may be even more anger about the usual parent/teenager disputes (for instance, what time they come home).

CONCLUSION

These notes touch on some aspects of grieving in children. They are not in any way comprehensive or complete: they intend to give a flavour of some of the special factors that affect bereaved children. There are also some suggestions of things that may be helpful. However it is important to recognise that there is no 'perfect' or 'right' way to talk or be with bereaved children. Children generally let us know if we make mistakes, and we all do. The most that we can do is let children know that we care about them, that we are interested in their experience and that we will do our best to try to understand what that is.

The information in these notes could be summarised as follows:

- Bereaved children experience pain and grief.
- There is no magic way of taking this away.
- Sometimes because of their age, children may have particular issues following a death that are related to lack of understanding or information.
- You can help by providing appropriate information.
- You can help by allowing and helping children to express their feelings.
- You can help by sharing your own experiences appropriately.
- You can help by providing a continuity of discipline and by maintaining routines that work well (where possible).
- Help others to support you and/or your child. There may be friends or family who want to help but don't know what you need. Requesting specific help may give them the opportunity they have been waiting for.

Remember you can always call us at the Laura Centre if you have any particular concerns or questions.

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