

Children and Grief

Children grieve and mourn just as deeply as adults, but depending on their cognitive and emotional development, they will experience and express their grief differently from the grown-ups around them and their response will depend on the knowledge and skills available to them at the time of the death.

At a time of grief, children need their parents or caregivers to be honest with them. Children need accurate, factual information and the freedom to ask questions. It is okay to say that “Grandpa has died”. Words such as “gone, lost or sleeping” can cause more confusion and anxiety. Check with your child as to what they have heard and reword what is needed to be accurate and clear.

A child needs to be able to express their feelings and to be appropriately included in decisions and discussions and family rituals of remembrance. They will need stable, consistent attention from caregivers, and time to explore and come to terms with the meaning of their loss. Just as we are all different from each other in our personalities in how we think, feel and behave on a day to day basis we are all different in how we grieve. We will experience and express our grief in ways unique to us as an individual. Failure to understand and accept these different ways of mourning can result in hurt feelings and conflict among family members as well as a “pushing down” and hiding of true emotions. By not allowing a child to express grief can lead to complicated and unhealthy physical and emotional manifestations down the road.

Some factors that will influence the grief experience in a child are:

The type of relationship the child had with the deceased.

Was it an anticipated or sudden death. ie: Was there opportunity before the death to have conversation about what was going to happen.

Has the child had previous experience with death. This may have been the death of a pet or having observed other persons dealing with a death.

Are there adults around who are modeling healthy grieving and coping skills.

Is there opportunity for the child to participate in meaningful rituals allowing them to create memories, express their feelings and the have the opportunity to process the grief.

Children just as adults need to have their feelings validated and need to have healthy ways of expressing their grief. Art, music, writing, looking at pictures, creating a memory book are some options. Do not be afraid to talk with your child about the deceased, mention them by name in conversations and share your favourite memories. Tears and laughter are healthy expressions. Listen to your child and their stories and memories.

There are some good books available specifically for children on the topic of grief. Other resources may include your child’s school counselor, the funeral home, your place of worship or a counseling agency that offers family, grief or play therapy.

Grief needs attention and cannot be pushed aside or rushed through. It needs to be walked through as painful as it may be. By seeking help and resources and providing honesty and a comforting environment for your child you are allowing them to journey this pathway in a healthy way.

By Laurie Whitaker. Laurie is the manager of the Home Support Program at Family Services of Central Alberta. For more information on family programs and grief groups, call 403-343-6400 or check www.fsca.ca.