

How To Help Your Child Grieve

Helpful Pointers and Guidelines for Walking Your Child Through His Journey of Grief

by Dr. Dawn-Marie Pearson, Marriage, Family & Crisis Therapist

www.DrDawnMarie.com



How To Tell A Child About Death or Loss

Children need to be told the truth, as soon as possible, in an age appropriate and truthful way. Here are some guidelines to help.

1. **Choose an appropriate time.** Tell the child about the death as soon as possible.
2. **Choose a familiar location.** Talk to the child in a familiar setting, if possible.
3. **Choose a simple, honest explanation, using clear and concise words.** Give adequate, but not detailed information. Be age appropriate. Avoid saying things like: “Grandpa is now a star in the sky” or “Aunt Wilma is gone away.” These types of explanations are confusing and can complicate the grief process. For example, the child may think Aunt Wilma will come back any day now.
4. **Check that the child understands.** Don’t assume that the child understands the words you have chosen.
5. **Answer questions and address any fears and anxieties the child may have.** This includes reassuring him that he has people who love him and who will care for him. In some cases this also includes reassuring the child that he is not to blame for the death.
6. **Listen, listen, listen to the child’s response.** Pay attention to both the verbal and non-verbal responses. Validate his feelings, assist him with overwhelming feelings, and resist the temptation to tell him not to feel a certain way. Involve and include him in the conversation and dynamic rather than simply reporting information to him.
7. **Be prepared to repeat information.** The child may have questions and may even ask the same questions repeatedly. Answer his questions and give appropriate clarity as needed.

What You Should Know

- Infants and toddlers grieve.
- Very young children, like older children, can experience a range of intense emotions, including sorrow.
- Grief is normal and useful.
- You may find it difficult to explain death.
- A grieving child may still be active and playful. This does not mean he is not grieving.
- It is good for a grieving child to cry and experience the sadness and sorrow of loss.
- How the family reacts to death significantly influences children.
- Some children may think they caused the death.
- Children need age appropriate, truthful information.

Children who do not grieve will experience the effects of the loss in various ways throughout life. Play therapy is a proven way to help children grieve and process through loss. Visit us at DrDawnMarie.com for play therapy information.

Memorial Services, Funerals, Burials, Visiting the Grave

As adults we have various rituals surrounding death. While some of these rituals can be helpful, they can also be stressful and painful for children. They can also be confusing for a child. If you choose to allow your child to participate in any of the rituals, it is extremely helpful to explain some of what they will see and hear, who will be there, and what will happen. Be prepared to answer their questions.

What a Grieving Child May Feel or Experience

- Difficulty sleeping or eating
- Clingy behavior
- Explosive emotions
- Fear
- Guilt
- Regression
- Acting out
- Emotional numbness or lack of feeling

The Hope of Glory

A very important aspect of telling a child about the death of a loved one is to tell them about the hope of Glory. A family that knows and loves Christ knows that they will see their loved one again. Therefore the separation from their loved one is temporary. This is an important detail for a child. It gives them a sense of true and legitimate hope in the midst of pain. This is also part of a child learning that death is a part of life, but that because of Jesus, death doesn't separate us forever. This is therefore a profound opportunity for your child to begin to personalize the importance of knowing Jesus, and for him to see the amazing power of God to give us eternal life.

And now, dear brothers, I want you to know what happens to a Christian when he dies so that when it happens, you will not be full of sorrow, as those are who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and then came back to life again, we can also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him all the Christians who have died. (1 The. 4:13-14 TLB)

Dr. Dawn-Marie Pearson www.DrDawnMarie.com DrDawnMarie@outlook.com