

Tips for Parents: Helping Your Child after a Crisis

Children may be especially upset and express feelings about the crisis. These reactions are normal and usually will not last long.

Listed below are some problems you may see in your children:

1. Excessive fear of darkness, separation, or being alone
2. Clinging to parents, fear of strangers
3. Worry
4. Increase in immature behaviors
5. Not want to go to school
6. Changes in eating/sleeping behaviors
7. Increase in either aggressive behavior or shyness
8. Bedwetting or thumb sucking
9. Persistent nightmares
10. Headaches or other physical symptoms

The following will help your child:

1. Talk with your child about his/her feelings about the disaster. Share your feelings, too
2. Talk about what happened. Give your child information he/she can understand
3. Reassure your child that you are safe and together. You may need to repeat this reassurance often
4. Hold and touch your child often
5. Spend extra time with your child at bedtime
6. If you feel your child is having problems at school, talk to his/her teacher so you can work together to help your child.

Please reread this sheet from time to time in the coming months. Usually a child's emotional response to a crisis or disaster will not last long, but some problems may be present or reoccur for many months afterward. Your school-based mental health provider is skilled in talking with people impacted by trauma.

Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief: Tips for Teachers and Parents

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- Emotional shock and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- Regressive (immature) behaviors, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- Explosive emotions and acting out behavior that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and away to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- Asking the same questions over and over, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones. Some of these recommendations come from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

- Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings: All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- Grieving is a process, not an event: Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.
- Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event: Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.

- Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death: Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death: Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way: We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need: Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.
- Children will need long-lasting support: The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.
- Keep in mind that grief work is hard: It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- Understand that grief work is complicated: Deaths that result from a terrorist act or war can bring forth many issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Grieving may also be complicated by a need for vengeance or justice and by the lack of resolution of the current situation: the conflict may continue and the nation may still feel at risk. The sudden or violent nature of the death or the fact that some individuals may be considered missing rather than dead can further complicate the grieving process.
- Be aware of your own need to grieve: Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

Developmental Phases in Understanding Death

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

- **Infants and Toddlers:** The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death.
- **Preschoolers:** Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of

death. For instance, as a result of the World Trade Center disaster, some children may imagine that going into tall buildings may cause someone's death.

- **Early Elementary School:** Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes

crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. In case of war images, young children may not be able to differentiate between what they see on television, and what might happen in their own neighborhood. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5-6—if jet planes don't fly, then people don't die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.

- **Middle School:** Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.

- **High School:** Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

Tips for Children and Teens with Grieving Friends and Classmates

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this "secondary" loss.

- Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under "helping children cope."
- Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings, particularly for students who have family in the military or other risk related professions. Children need reassurance from caregivers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., "Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route....") and what to expect (see "expressions of grief" above).

- Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their "regular" friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.
- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.
- Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend's loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

Resources for Grieving and Traumatized Children

At times of severe stress, both children and adults need extra support. Children who are physically and emotionally closest to this tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

(Adapted from material first posted on the NASP website after September 11, 2001.)

PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL CHANGES (Post-Traumatic "Distress Signals")

Individuals – children, teens and adults – may experience and exhibit a wide range of post-traumatic stress disorder reactions after a crisis or disaster. Administrators, faculty members, school staff and parents should be aware that these changes are not unusual for anyone who has gone through or been affected by a crisis or traumatic event.

Your child may benefit from additional counseling and support if symptoms persist after three months or if the symptoms are delayed and appear three to six months after the crisis event.

Examples of some reactions are listed here:

Physical Changes

- Easily startled
- Increase anxiety
- Sleep patterns interrupted
- Change in eating patterns
- Heart rate increases

Mental Changes

- Difficulty with memory
- Decreased computational skills
- Decreased ability to analyze
- Slower learning speed
- Impaired decision-making skills
- Decreased self-awareness

Emotional Changes

- Feelings of isolation
- Developmental regression
- Depression
- Denial
- Anger
- Lack of enthusiasm for activities that were previously enjoyed
- Return to past hurts and trauma
- Bitterness
- Decreased intimacy
- Lack of trust
- Guilt
- Fear of recurrence

Addressing Grief Brief Facts and Tip

1. **Grief is not solely related to the death of a loved one.** The symptoms, characteristics, and process of grieving can be similar after other types of loss (e.g., divorce, transition, moving).
2. **Grief is personal.** There is no right or wrong way to grieve. How people grieve can be influenced by developmental level, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, mental health, disabilities, family, personal characteristics, and previous experiences.
3. **Grief is often characterized by sadness, emotional pain, and introspection in adults. However, children's grief reactions differ according to age and developmental level:**
 - **Preschool** - Regressive behaviors, decreased verbalization, increased anxiety
 - **Elementary** - Decreased academic performance, attention/concentration, and attendance; irritability, aggression, and disruptive behaviors; somatic complaints; sleep/eating disturbances; social withdrawal; guilt, depression, and anxiety; repeated re-telling of the event
 - **Middle and High School** - Decreased academic performance, attention/concentration, and attendance; avoidance, withdrawal, high risk behaviors or substance abuse, difficulty with peer relations, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbing or depression
4. **Grieving does not have a timeline.** Schools should be aware of anniversaries, birthdays, developmental milestones, and other factors that could affect students months or years after the loss.
5. **Grieving involves meeting specific milestones.** Individuals are likely to experience (and often re-experience) some or all of the following adjustments/responses:
 - Accepting the death
 - Experiencing the feelings and emotional pain associated with death and separation from the deceased
 - Adjusting to changes and an altered environment that no longer includes the deceased
 - Finding ways to remember and memorialize the deceased
6. **Grieving is a normal response to loss, but may require some support.** Additional assistance should be provided when the following are noted:
 - Marked loss of interest in daily activities
 - Changes in eating and sleeping habits
 - Wishing to be with the deceased loved one
 - Fear of being alone
 - Significant decreases in academic performance and achievement
 - Increased somatic complaint
 - Changes in attendance patterns (e.g., chronic absenteeism)

7. Things to avoid

- Euphemisms when referring to the deceased such as “they are sleeping,” or “they went away”
- Minimizing statements such as “it was only your great-grandmother, (or dog, neighbor, etc.)”
- Predicting a timeframe to complete the grieving process such as, “it has been a month, you should be getting over this,” or “the pain will fade soon”
- Over-identifying, (e.g., “I know how you feel”)
- Too much self-disclosure (e.g., I lost my mom to cancer) as not everyone handles self-disclosure the same way and the focus should remain on the student’s grief

8. Things to do

- Maintain routines as normally as possible
- Ask questions to ascertain the youth’s understanding of the event and emotional state
- Give the youth permission to grieve
- Provide age and developmentally-appropriate answers
- Connect the bereaved with helping professionals and other trusted mentors and adults
- Encourage students to adopt adaptive coping strategies, particularly ones that will involve interaction with other students (e.g., sports, clubs)
- Educate teachers and families about what is healthy grief and how to support the student