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HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD COPE WITH LOSS?

Sometimes, helping children to understand and cope with death is difficult. Here is some basic information intended to aid you as you help your child try to understand their loss.

AGE MAY PLAY A ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING,

but it is not definitive. There are many popular theories about the ways children understand loss at different ages and developmental stages. Our understanding of how children come to understand death has changed over time, but it is generally agreed that younger children do not recognize death as permanent. Even after recognizing the permanent loss of the body, questions may continue, especially around what happens after death. Children may ask questions you have already answered several times as they struggle to come to terms with the loss. A child's developmental stage can mean being "surprised" at a death even if they have already been told that someone is dying or has died. A child's understanding of death may change with age, so questions may arise long after the death occurred.

CHILDREN ARE AWARE OF DEATH

Adults often like to believe that children are unaware of the existence of death. Children receive many messages about death from many different sources. The media brings news of death by tragedy. Nursery rhymes or songs such as "The Worms Crawl In" or "Ring Around the Rosie" talk about decomposition and disease. Even fairy tales tell stories where main characters die, such as the wolf in "The Three Little Pigs" or the wicked stepmother in "Sleeping Beauty". These things are not necessarily bad but they can allow children to work through fears and anxiety about loss in safe ways.

PLAY IS CHILDRENS' WORK

Children explore, and process their life experiences in play. For example, if a grandparent dies and a child is found to be "Playing Funeral" a week later, this does not mean the child has a "morbid" curiosity, but rather that he or she is trying to come to some understanding of their funeral experience

by role play. Play is a good way to facilitate the grief experience, especially for younger children. Drawing pictures about their feelings, writing about them, telling stories or even "acting out" what has happened are all ways that adults can engage children to process their loss.

THEY KNOW SOMETHING IMPORTANT IS HAPPENING

Without specific information about what has happened, children are left to their devices. A child's imagination is often far scarier than anything you might tell them. For example, every parent must decide for his or herself whether or not a child can attend a funeral, but any child can be told what happens at a funeral, why a funeral is held, or even have their own personal ritual at home. The most important thing here is to explicitly include your child in a positive way, rather than leaving him or her to fill in the blanks. A good guideline: If they are old enough to ask, they are old enough for an answer. It is all right to say "I don't know, let's find out together".

ROUTINE CAN PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE

When a family is grieving there is a desire to "let the rules go" in an effort to be kind. In the immediate aftermath of loss, this may be unavoidable to some degree. However, in the long term, this can often add to the sense of chaos and confusion. Regular meals, bedtimes, activities, all can assist the child in having a sense of security when other areas of their life are beyond their control (e.g. the fact that someone has died). This can be truly exhausting for a parent struggling to grieve themselves. When possible, it may be beneficial to have another adult or family member "run the household" for a brief period of time. When this is not possible, all the parent can really do is their best, even if it isn't perfect.



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HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD COPE WITH LOSS? (CONTINUED)

A NOTE ON TEENS

Loss for teenagers can be particularly difficult. In a time when the single most important thing in life is to fit in, suddenly something about them is radically different. Changes in body chemistry can wreak havoc on moods and may affect the ability of a teen to understand and process their loss. Older children have often expressed conflict between a need to be strong for their parents and resentment that they feel the need to do so at all. It can be beneficial to explicitly grant parents and teens permission to grieve in their own way. A movie night where the family watches Grandma's favorite movies may be more effective for a teen than calling a sit down family meeting to share feelings about Grandma's death, as an adult might prefer.

The following resources are available for children in the Portland Metro Area and Salem.

The Dougy Center

P 866.775.5683 (Toll Free)

P 503.775.5685

www.dougy.org

Me Too & Company

(Sponsored by the Oregon Hospice Association and others)

P 503.228.2104

<https://oregonhospice.org/metoo/>

Hope Bereavement Services

(Sponsored by SW Washington Medical Center)

P 360.696.5120

<https://www.peacehealth.org/southwest/bereavement-services>

Camp Erin

(Sponsored by Providence Healthcare)

P 503-215-5879

<https://oregon.providence.org/our-services/c/camp-erin/>

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

There are times when children or families coping with grief need extra support. The best suggestion I've ever heard about coping with grief applies to both adults and children. "When you don't know what to do, it's time to ask for help" (Doka). Asking for help does not suggest that the parent has failed in some way. In fact, the opposite is true. Asking for help suggests that the parent is putting the interest of the child before their own need to have all the answers, and no parent could reasonably be faulted for this. Another time to ask for help is when you see significant changes in behavior, grades, or personality. The help may not necessarily be a professional, but simply someone who connects well with the child and with whom you and the child are comfortable.

ASK.... AND THEN LISTEN

In the end, the most important thing you can do is to simply sit still with your child and listen. Sometimes the most seemingly simple thing is the hardest. It can be difficult to hear your child express fear, anxiety, and sadness, especially as you try to cope with your own, but this can be the most powerful thing you can do. Children often have wisdom that we sometimes miss in the midst of our own suffering.

Portland/Salem and Surrounding Areas:

P 800.936.4756 (Toll Free)

Eugene:

P 866.306.4279 (Toll Free)

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