

Ask A School Psychologist

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PART 1 OF 3 - LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

My Child has Experienced a Significant Loss, How do I Help Them Cope? Heal?

Experiencing loss is an unfortunate and difficult part of life; consequently, it is an experience that parents want to protect their children from for as long as possible. Regrettably, loss will touch a child's life at some point or another, so parents need information to help their children process and heal. Loss comes in many forms: death of a loved one, divorce/family separation or moving to a new city/town. I am writing about this topic over the next three issues of Calgary's Child: Part 1. Loss of a Loved One; Part 2. Loss of a Nuclear Family Unit; and Part 3. Loss of a Community.

The loss of a parent, relative, close friend or family pet is a difficult experience for children. Children are best able to cope with and process these losses when they have been prepared, in an honest and caring manner to understand death as part of the life cycle. Children are far more capable of dealing with the loss of a grandparent, parent, sibling, friend or family pet when they receive ample love, comfort and support, as well as an honest and simple discussion of death, followed by a ritual to say goodbye.

Expressing emotions

When someone we love dies, we grieve that loss. Grief is the multi-faceted response to loss, a set of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical reactions that are seen following the death of a loved one. It is important that children see their parents grieve. If parents do not cry, children may conclude that emotions should be suppressed. Anger, denial, guilt and fear are all normal parts of grief. Children need to work through these feelings and parents can role-model this process. Looking at photographs and recalling cherished memories as a family can be helpful. If we are fortunate, we learn to grieve by shedding tears over the loss of a pet.

It is important to understand that when children experience a loss, they often react in different ways than adults do. Children often ask questions repeatedly and will interpret their experience through play and drawings. Some children will demonstrate their feelings by acting out or misbehaving. Increased aggression (physical and verbal), and decreased concentration is common. Children will re-process loss as they mature - adults need to be patient and compassionate.

Discussing death

It is important to remember that children are always thinking - trying to make sense of an experience. Their thoughts about death are often more distressing than reality. Children need to understand that death results from a physical cause. How death is described to a child depends on their age - use words that the child is able to understand. For example, "Grandpa had a heart attack and that means that his heart stopped moving". Using words such as "pass away" or "go to sleep" or are "lost" can result in confusion, resulting in unnecessary stress and fear. Use the words "die" and "death".

Reading with a child and talking about a story in relation to their experience is an effective strategy. Children generally feel more comfortable talking about an experience when they can relate it to a story they have just read.

Some children's books that may be helpful are:

- Water Bugs and Dragon flies by Doris Stickney
- AarvyAardvark Finds Hope by Donna R. O'Toole
- The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages by Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D.
- What's Heaven? By Maria Shriver

Saying goodbye

Saying goodbye to a loved one is important and can become part of healing memories for children. Participating in mourning rituals help us process death and provide a way to bid farewell. Generally, parents are advised to allow their children to attend memorial and funeral services if a child asks to go. It is important to provide your child with an opportunity to do something in memory of the deceased: light a candle, plant a tree, make a memory scrapbook or give a donation.

Stay in contact with your child's school. Inquire about available supports; most schools offer programs such as Rainbows (rainbows.ca) to assist students with processing loss. With time and continuing support from family, children can cope with the loss of a loved one and emerge from a grieving period with cherished memories.

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