

15 Important Things to Know about Grieving Children

- **Children want to share their experience, though need permission to do so.**
Children, adolescents and teens all want to share their feelings, though they often believe adults won't understand. Don't impose your beliefs on children and don't tell them what they should feel.
- **Don't say "I know how you feel," or tell a child how to feel.**
It is possible to relate to a child's feelings and situation, but don't take over those feelings. If you have had a similar experience, sharing it with the child can be positive, though always remember this is the child's journey and not yours. Don't push empty reassurances on the child.
- **Children of specific age groups do not grieve in the same way.**
Each child is unique and each child had a unique relationship with the deceased. Allow the child the freedom to express their feeling in their own way and in their own time. A child's emotional investment may differ radically from a sibling.
- **A child's apparent lack of feelings when told of a significant death does not mean they don't understand or care.**
Children want to avoid emotional pain. When told of the death of a significant other they pretend that it did not happen because they can't absorb all that pain at once. Children try to play so it won't hurt so much.
- **Bereaved children often engage in acting out behavior to get our attention.** Explosive emotions and regressive behaviors are a way for children to teach us about the underlying needs for safety, security, information and trust.
- **Grief is on-going and doesn't end at a specific time.**
Healing the heart takes time. The grieving child can't hurry up and get over it. The child will always miss the deceased and grief can resurface. Regardless of how much time has passed the child should be allowed to express their feelings.
- **Children do not grieve in an orderly and predictable fashion.**
Children generally grieve in bits and pieces and they cannot sustain grief the same way adults do. Children grieve, and then move away from the pain. When children feel vulnerable, it's common for them to quickly shut down and move onto something else.
- **Respond to grieving children at a feeling level as opposed to an intellectual level.**
Don't rush to diagnose or "treat" the child. Children will give you cues through body posture, emotions in the face and repetitive themes in play and questioning. Patience will lead to a deeper understanding.

- **Children should be told the truth.**
When adults try to protect children by using half-truths, misleading statements, or telling a lie, a child can typically sense this and their imagination takes over. This may also teach the child that one doesn't always have to be honest when dealing with others.
- **There is no magical age or time to talk about death.**
Teachable moments are present in everyday life. Talk to children about animals that have died: the insect they saw on the sidewalk, a baby bird that fell from tree, an animal that was hit by a car, or a pet. Children's literature is full of examples as well, as is everyday news and media.
- **Give children permission to ask questions and encourage them.**
The youngest of children will ask repetitive questions, often of multiple people. This is a child's way of making sure the story and facts remains the same. Each time the story is repeated honestly, the child understands on a deeper level.
- **Communicate to the child that you truly wish to understand their feelings.**
Be patient, and don't push. Meet the child where they are. Children who are grieving don't often trust easily. Words aren't always necessary. A special look, glance or touch can reassure a child. If you promise a child something ensure you follow through. If something happens and you can't fulfill your promise be honest with the child.
- **Give children permission to attend end of life rituals and participate if they want to.**
Help children understand what they will experience. Ask the child what they believe will happen, their answer might surprise you. Explain new words: casket, ritual, memorial service, cremation and pallbearer. Encourage the creation of a special drawing or poem that can be buried with their loved one or displayed during services. Even the youngest child, who may not remember much, will remember being included as they grow older.
- **Acknowledge young children have magical thinking.**
Children often believe they have magical powers and need to create a reason for what has happened. Additionally children can believe that they caused the death, daddy is coming home.
- **Recognize that laughter and play are part of grieving.**
Play is a child's "work." Commit to meeting the child where they are on their own playground of life.