



Helping Kids Cope with Grief

Hints for helping (per Darcie D. Sims):

- Be available
- Listen (with your ears, eyes and heart)
- TOUCH (Often says, "I know what happened and I care. I am here if you need me.)
- Face your own feelings of loss and grief, share them as you like.
- Be open and honest with feelings. Create an atmosphere of open acceptance that invites questions and fosters confidence and love.
- Encourage expressions of grief (talking, writing, painting, yelling, etc.). Provide appropriate places to express grief.
- Acknowledge the reality that grief HURTS. Do not attempt to rescue the child (or yourself) from the hurt. Work through the grief.
- Provide a quiet, private place to come to whenever the child needs to be alone.
- Respect a child's need to grieve. Almost anything can trigger grief.
- Understand that priorities change. What you think is important may NOT be considered so by the child as such.
- Realize that grief causes difficulty in concentrating is a NORMAL and NATURAL REACTION TO LOSS of any kind.
- Understand that other losses often accompany the identical loss. A changing residence, caretaker, school or peer groups all add to the grief experienced. Loss of trust often compounds grief.
- Try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensations. He still needs to feel a part of his peer group and should be expected to function accordingly.
- Temper your expectations with kindness and understanding. Continue to expect him to function.
- Set realistic goals with the child concerning his behavior, school performance and homework. Help the child create his own routines if necessary.
- Help the child find a supportive peer group.
- Help the child's friends learn to be supportive.
- Become part of the caring team by establishing lines of communication with everyone involved with the child. Keep each other informed about the child's progress.
- Understand that grieving children are often "busy" with the task of establishing a new identity. WHO AM I NOW? becomes a major concern. Family roles may change as well as identities. This self-search often overshadows all other concerns for many weeks and months.
- Know that grief lasts far longer than ANYONE expects. It may take months or even years before a child displays signs of the full impact of a family change.
- Maintain a daily routine if all possible, continuity becomes a safety net for

grieving children. The continuity of attending school daily, being required to perform certain tasks in and out of school and having a social routine provides children with some security and a sense of stability in a topsy turvey world.

- Have resources available about grief, loss and change.
- Understand that children and young people will continue to deal with the losses/changes they experience as they grow and mature. They will NOT GET OVER IT, but they can learn to GROW THROUGH the grief and discover that LOVE NEVER GOES AWAY.
- Continue to be available long after you think they "should be over it". Continue to reach out and care, just as you do now.

Should Children Attend Funerals?

Adapted from an article from Victor M. Parachin, M. Div.

Parents often are faced with a difficult decision in determining whether their child should attend funeral services for a loved one. Considering the following factors will assist parents in making this sensitive decision.

Does your child wish to participate?

Whenever a death occurs, children should be asked if they want to be involved. There is general agreement that children from the age of four should be allowed to decide whether they want to attend the funeral of a family member or close friend.

Parents should always be aware of the distinction between permitting a child to participate and not doing anything they find uncomfortable at the funeral home. Children's feelings should always be respected. Even within the same family, children may differ as to their level of involvement.

Children need advance explanation of what a funeral entails.

Youngsters are likely to be less anxious and more relaxed if they know what to expect. The explanation should include not only information about the death, but some description of the funeral home. The visitation room of a funeral chapel can overwhelm children.

Funeral director Dan Schaefer recommends that "no matter what age he or she is, the youngster should be told what to expect –the size of the room, the fact that there may be a lot of flowers, who will be coming and how they will probably be dressed, how long the child will stay.

Whatever explanation is made should be in concrete terms, particularly the various details about funerals. Here are some helpful statements of explanation.

- A funeral is a way to celebrate the person's passage into a new life of peace and joy
- A funeral is a way to honor the person, to say "good bye" and "thank you" for all the good things the person has given us in his or her life
- The funeral home is a building or house where the bodies of people we love are

- prepared for burial
- A casket is a box which will hold the body
- It is okay to look at the body
- It will be okay to touch the body, but you do not have to

In addition to details about the funeral, parents should try to outline the range of emotions which the child, depending on his or her age, might experience sorrow, loneliness, anger, guilt, fear, denial.

There are many excellent children's books, readily available in public libraries and funeral homes, which can be read with children in order to prepare them for the funeral.

Children need to know that people may cry at the funeral home and the funeral

While children often cry, they don't usually see adults shed tears. When they do, they can become frightened. Walking into a room to find adults crying can be extremely unnerving for a child. Reassure the child that adults tears are also an appropriate response to the situation.

Joy and Mary Johnson, directors of the Center Corp in Omaha, Nebraska, suggest the following example of a way to prepare children for emotions that may be present. "There will be much coming and going. People may bring food. They may bring flowers. There will be lots of family and friends that you know. They may cry together and hug each other. Crying is OK. It helps the sad get better too. Whenever you feel like crying after someone has died, it is OK."

Children need to be with a parent, relative, or close friend during the event. This is to ensure that the child is not left alone or isolated. Dr. Roberta Temes, a New York Psychologist, strongly recommends that presence of a significant adult. She states, "So vital is adult support and presence during commemorative services that a child's attendance at the funeral will be a good experience for him/her only if a familiar adult accompanies him/her and holds his/her hand, literally, throughout. If the adult is someone the child knows and trusts, he/she will not be overwhelmed by the proceedings. The most important advice regarding a child's attendance at funerals is that an adult whom he/she knows must be there to hold his/her hand. A child can derive comfort from the funeral only if he/she is physically secure."

This recommendation applies not only to younger children, but often to teenagers who may not need much supervision. They also need guidance.

Children should not be allowed to disrupt the funeral for others

There are natural limits to children's effective participation in a funeral rite. For instance, a child under seven years of age should not be expected to sit through a lengthy religious service.

Also, if a parent suspects that a child might become hysterical during the service, it is advisable for all concerned to have such a sensitive child remain at home. However, this does not mean totally denying the child participation. An eight-year old girl who

did not attend her grandmother's funeral helped serve food to the relatives and friends at the family home after the extended family and network of friends.

Finally, if in doubt, it is wiser to have the children present at the funeral than to shield them from the reality of death. Elizabeth Ogg, author of the book, *Facing Death and Loss*, advises "It is usually better to err on the side of allowing children to be part of all the family experiences, including whatever the family does in the way of honoring the dead, than to exclude them from the painful ones. Being close to the family in a time of bereavement can be a vital source or strength."

Thoughts about Children Attending Funerals

Children need to participate in rites, rituals, and ceremonies. It provides an arena for the children to work through their feelings

Children should never be forced to attend a funeral. Each decision to attend should take into account the age and the effect on the child. An adult, known to the child, should be present to assist the child, if necessary, during all phases of the funeral.

If attending, the adult should help the child to understand what to expect in terms of atmosphere, mourners, going to the casket or not, and how to extend sympathy in a caring way.>

Funerals give children the chance to participate in important family events and the opportunity for therapeutic communications.

>A funeral gives the opportunity to encourage and facilitate the normal mourning process and to prevent a delayed or distorted grief process.

If your child does not attend the funeral, give him/her the opportunity to visit the grave or to have a private ritual at home.>

It is important to give the child the opportunity to express their thought and feelings after the ceremony.

Parents of high school children should attend with their child to provide guidance and support.