
FAMILY • SERVICES

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Mandala Children's House 3/05



Signs of spring are beginning to appear. Tulips and daffodils are poking up their heads, giving the promise of spring after a long and rainy winter. Spring brings the hope of new beginnings. The cycle of life repeats itself everywhere, but we see it especially in nature and in the turning of our seasons. Life. Death. New life.

For many reasons, it seems appropriate to focus this month's newsletter on death, which is a part of the natural cycle of life. First of all, in Small Group next month, activities and discussion with the children will center on *Change and Growth*, which will include death and loss as part of the life process. (You will hear more about this in the next school newsletter.) Secondly, a number of parents have come to me in the last several months telling me that their children have been unexpectedly asking about death and dying. This is very normal for preschoolers.

Talking to Children About *Death*

*"When we have done all the work we were sent to Earth to do,
we are allowed to shed our body,
which imprisons our soul like a cocoon encloses the future butterfly.
And when the time is right, we can let go of it and we will be free of pain,
free of fears and worries--free as a very beautiful butterfly, returning home to God..."*

(Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., from a letter to a child with cancer)

Death is a difficult subject. A great mystery. It is also one of those issues--much like sex--that we'd rather avoid talking about, especially with our children. Death is hard enough for us to cope with, let alone explain it to our children. Much of the time, we are able to keep death "out there" and we can stay removed from its impact. That usually works, until it suddenly touches our lives, either crashing in upon us like an earthquake with tremendous force (as in the death of a loved one) or creeping softly in on little feet (as in the innocent question posed to us by our wondering son or daughter).

Many of us struggle to come to grips with our own losses. Intense emotions readily overtake us. And we are helpless to know how to help our young ones understand. We don't want to "say the wrong thing" or "worry our child." Often, we are speechless. Worse yet, questions about death may bring up our childhood issues about religion or rekindle uncertainties about faith and God. Old childhood beliefs may have been discarded along the way, but what do we have to put in their place? Our child's innocent question can throw us into confusion. We want to have something to give to our children to comfort them. But we're not sure what that is.

Dr. Maria Nagy, in her comprehensive study of children's perceptions of death, found that all children question:

- *What is death?*
- *What makes people die?*
- *What happens to people when they die; where do they go?*

This newsletter is not meant to answer *all* your questions. It is meant to give you a starting place to begin talking to your children. It's meant to help you normalize death for them, because death is a normal part of life.

Prevention: *Introducing Death to Children*

Read books about death to children occasionally. Discuss the fact that nothing lives forever. Bodies grow old and stop working. Plants die, animals die, and people die, as in the stories. Allow your child time to process the ideas and to ask questions. Many original versions of fairy tales, such as *Cinderella*, deal with the death of a parent and the healing that comes from grieving.

Here are some good introductory books for talking about death as a normal part of life. I have many of these books in my office for loan to parents.

- **Lifetimes:** *Explaining Death to Children*, B. Mellonie and R. Ingpen, 1982. (Simple, uses life cycle.)
- **The Fall of Freddie the Leaf:** *A Story of Life for All Ages*, Leo Buscaglia. (*Balance of life/death.*)
- **Why Do People Die?** Cynthia McGregor, 1999. (Good pictures, more words.)
- **Annie and The Old One**, Miska Miles, 1971. (Beautiful Navaho story of grandma getting ready to die.)

Read simple versions of tales and myths that deal with death, from a variety of cultures. Point out how different people believe different things about what happens to people when they die. Discuss how people cope with loss.

Talk about famous people when they die. Children will usually be aware of the death from the news and adult conversation. Explain in simple terms what made the person important and how their deeds will live on after them.

Notice that many children's songs are about death. Sing these songs with your child so that death does not become a taboo subject.

Talk about death in your ordinary conversation and use the appropriate language. Use the words *death* and *dead*, instead of euphemisms such as *loss*, *gone to sleep*, *passed away*, and so on. Children are very literal and they will worry that they could die by simply "going to sleep." Just like sex, the more you start talking about death as a "normal" subject, the easier it will get for you!

When your child finds a dead insect or small animal, use it as an opportunity to learn what death means in concrete terms. Even very young toddlers can learn that death means no movement, stiffness, silence, and no response. If you are comfortable doing so, let your child hold the dead pet so she can compare that to how the animal used to be.

When a special pet dies, involve your child in the process. Talk about his feelings of loss. Read books about the death of a special pet. Encourage him to create a ritual for burial, if that seems appropriate. Have a ceremony (or funeral) and bury the pet outside with a marker. Invite your child to say something about the pet. Sing a song. Later, put together a book of remembrances. Plant something in memory of the pet. Some good books are:

- **Dog Heaven**, Cynthia Rylant, 1995. (Beautiful story and illustrations for loss of a pet.)
- **I'll always Love You**, Hans Wilhelm, 1985. (The love of a boy for his dog and mourning his loss.)
- **The Accident**, Carol Carrick, 1976. (A boy's vivid grief over death of his dog.)
- **The Tenth Good Thing About Barney**, Judith Viorst, 1987. (A boy remembering his dog who has died.)
- **Tough Boris**, Mem Fox, 1998. (Pirate is sad because his parrot dies)

Take a trip to a cemetery. Prepare your child for what to expect and what you will do there. Make some rubbings. Bring flowers to lay on the gravestones. This will bring out many questions about death and give your child a fuller, more concrete understanding of how we deal with death in our society.

Developmental Stages: *What A Child Understands At Each Age*

Start here: All children have a pervasive fear of being abandoned. The fear of separation from a parent begins before the age of one and continues to be experienced quite intensely until the child is about seven or eight. At this age, the fear begins to diminish, but it never disappears completely. Remember, too, that for a child who has experienced any significant early losses, this fear of abandonment will be all the more intense, taking a tenacious hold on a child's psyche.

Infants and Toddlers: Babies and toddlers do not understand the word death, but they do react to loss. They are highly sensitive to changes in the emotional atmosphere of the home. Responses of parents and significant others in the home may upset their security. Very young children may respond with irritability, variations in crying and eating, and bowel and bladder disturbances.

Ages Two and One-Half to Four Years: At this age, a child's primary fear is of separation from or the loss of his parents. Children view the world from the perspective of what they know about themselves. A child at this age has difficulty comprehending that death is final. They know they are alive, so others must be alive too. They do not understand any other possibility. Death is like sleep--you are asleep and then you wake up. Or, it is like taking a journey--you go away and then you come back. Because they are likely to think that the person who died is coming back at some point, they may seem unaffected by the death. Children will, however, have serious concerns about the reactions of significant people in their lives. They will be watching the adults in their world closely. Time concepts are also very limited for young children. Even after the funeral, parents may be shocked by a child's question "*When is Aunt Sara coming back?*"

Ages Four To Six Years: Children at this age may still not understand that death is final. Death is difficult for them to understand. It does not really make sense to them. The concepts of forever and the irreversibility of death are hard to grasp. Questions about "*what if*" may precede their attempts to negotiate situations in which the dead person might come back. For example, "*...what if the doctors could find a new heart for Grandma? Then she'll come back and be with us.*" Separation from parents is an ongoing fear. They may worry that something will happen to the parent while they are in school or child care. Children may feel and proclaim that they will not die or that their parents will not die. They take language very literally and clichés confuse them (ex: "*Papa is watching over me*") They also may worry that death in general is a punishment for violating rules, since "following the rules" is so important at this age.

Ages Six to Eight Years: By this time, children are more likely to have experienced the death of a person or a pet and are able to recognize that hoping or negotiating does not bring back the loved one. Children feel and express sadness, fear, and anxiety connected to death. Children's fears of separation from parents expand to concerns about losing friends, teachers, and others. Children may focus on wanting to know how to protect themselves and others from dying. They are curious about the physical aspects of death.

Ages Ten and Older: Children at this age are now able to formulate realistic concepts based on biological observation. Death is a perceptible end of bodily life. It is final and universal. It is brought on by natural as well as accidental causes. Death at the end of life is an especially frightening and painful event for young people ten years of age and older. Their earlier magical conception of death is replaced by one that is terminal and fearsome. This perspective carries with it feelings of fragility as young people search for their own identity and philosophy of life. When a loved one dies, they may have difficulty concentrating, schoolwork can be affected, they may isolate and withdraw from friends, become depressed, or look to drugs or alcohol to numb the pain.

When Someone Dies: *How To Tell A Child The Painful News*

It is always better for a child to hear the truth--in simple words that he or she can understand--directly from you, as soon as possible. Use short words and simple sentences. Children need to get the facts straight, so stay concrete, literal, and down to earth. This will help children to feel less powerless and more in control. The truth helps them put energy into coping, not into hiding from their fears. "Softening" the truth now only means more trouble for a child later! Be real--the truth has to come from inside you. Always conclude with the reassuring message that "*I'm taking care of things and I'm taking care of you.*"

The Four Steps to Telling The Truth to Children

1. **Acknowledge and name what's happening**
"I have something very sad to tell you. Grandpa just died."
2. **Take the responsibility off the child**
"It's not your fault. He was very old and his heart just stopped working."
3. **Acknowledge the child's feelings**

"You must be feeling really..... (sad? worried? upset?)"

and share your own feelings (if appropriate)

"I feel really sad, too. I'll really miss him."

4. Convey that you're in charge and give hope!

"I know that we'll get through this, even though we're sad..

It hurts a lot right now, but it won't hurt like this forever."

As parents, we want to take our child's pain away. But the kindest thing we can do at this time is to acknowledge what has happened and that our whole family, our whole little community, has been affected.

Answering Questions: *What Do I Say?*

First of all, there are no "correct" answers. It's okay to say, *"I don't know."* Answer the questions that children ask--not what you think they should be asking. Avoid lengthy answers overloaded with complicated explanations. Remember that children do not usually ask questions beyond their level of emotional readiness.

Answer questions simply and honestly. The truth is more manageable and reassuring to children than pretty lies that they sense are untrue. Children's imaginations will "fill in" the details if they are not given the facts. Too often, these imagined details are distorted and more horrifying than the actual details, and they can interfere with the long-term healing process. Unhealthy explanations create great fear and doubt and guilt in children. Here are some simple, honest answers:

Some Honest Answers:

- *"People die when they get very old and sick."*
- *"Aunt Nancy was very, very sick and she died from her illness."*
- *"Johnny was hurt badly in the car accident and died from being hit too hard on his head."*
- *"Susie stayed under the water too long and she died because her lungs could not get air."*
- *"Mr. Smith was very, very sad and shot himself because he no longer wanted to live."*

How do I answer my child's question: "What happens when people die?" Death is one of the great mysteries of life. You will want to speak from your own belief system. Children have built-in radar and quickly detect your inconsistency and deception. Share your honest convictions, but only what you believe.

A Natural Explanation

"When somebody dies, his or her body stops working. No matter how hard the doctors and nurses try, they can't make it work again. After they die, bodies become stiff and cold and the person can never talk, play, laugh, or move again. Nobody know for sure what happens next. Different people believe different things. When you are older, you can learn about it and decide for yourself. We feel very sad because we will miss the person. But we will always remember all the things about them that made them special. Like with Grandma Mary... remember all those things we loved about her--like her hugs, her kisses, her yummy cookies, and the way she told us stories? Even though she died, we don't forget her. Her family and friends will always remember her. So, in a way, she lives on in all of us, in our hearts."

(Adapted from NAEYC, *The Early Childhood Teacher's Manual*, Children and Death)

A Spiritual Explanation

"When somebody dies, their body stops working, and no matter how hard the doctors or nurses try, they can't make it work again. But their spirit goes on living. I believe that when your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels to take your spirit up to Heaven to be with him where he loves you

forever. Heaven isn't a place that you can see. It's a place that you believe in. (I imagine it's a beautiful place where everyone is happy and peaceful.) The angels only take a person's spirit or soul to heaven. They leave the person's body here. Your spirit is made up of all those things we can't see that make you a wonderful person. Like with Grandma Mary ...it's all those special things we remember that we loved about her...like her hugs, her kisses, her yummy cookies, and the way she told us stories. Even though she's gone to heaven, no one who goes to heaven is forgotten. Grandma's family and friends will always remember her. So, in a way, she lives on in all of us, in our hearts."

(Adapted from *What's Heaven* by Maria Shriver, 1999)

An "I Don't Know..." Explanation

"Some people believe that dying is like walking through a door into a place we can't see when we are alive. I'm not really sure. Beliefs help when someone dies. It is important for you to know them. Dying may be a new beginning. We don't know. It is good for you to know about endings and beginnings. It is good for you to know about living and dying."

(Adapted from *Tell Me, Papa* by Joy and Mary Johnson, 1990)

How do I answer: "Why are you crying, Mommy?" Tell your child: "Mommy is full of sadness. The tears have to come out so that I can feel better." Parents carry an unfounded worry that their child cannot handle (or will be harmed) by seeing them cry. This is not true! In fact, it can be a very healthy thing. It models for them that tears are "healing for the soul" and that it is normal for all people to cry at times of deep sorrow. Just remember to deal with your "raw" grief privately, so that children are not overwhelmed by seeing their mother or father fall apart.

Always put words to what your child sees, so that he will be reassured:

"I'm just crying now to let the sadness out, but it won't go on forever. I'll be all right."

"Daddy wants to be alone because he is sad about Granny's death. He still loves us."

Be aware that children who ask questions about death often and regularly are working through the issue. Children who have had a recent experience with death will often need to ask questions again and again, over a long period of time, in order to fully integrate the experience. In some cases, the questions reflect a genuine insecurity or fear related to other issues. As your best approach, provide loving reassurance to your child. If she asks "When will I die?" respond with "I hope you live a very long time because your bring joy to everyone and many people love your a lot." If the questions and concerns continue for more than a few weeks, think about seeking guidance from a teacher or a professional.

The causes of death are of great interest to most children. This is natural, as they are trying hard to understand all aspects of the world around them. If they ask a blunt question of a grieving child or parent about the cause of the death when the person is not ready to talk about it yet, help by saying "Julia isn't ready to tell you now because it makes her very sad. Maybe in a few days, if she's ready, she'll tell you." If you do know, give a brief explanation: "Julia's father was in a car accident."

Do some reading to help yourself talk to your child after the death of a loved one. These books will help you understand more about children and grief. You will learn how to facilitate healing.

GOOD BOOKS FOR PARENTS

- **Helping Children Cope With Death**, Joan S. Prestine, 1993. (Very straight forward--a favorite!)
- **Talking About Death**, Earl Grollman, 1990. (Answers lots of questions for parents.)
- **Helping Children Cope With Separation and Loss**, Claudia Jarratt, 1982. (Excellent.)
- **On Children and Death**, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, 1983. (By the "grandmother" of all grief work.)

- **Read your child stories about other children who have lost a loved one.** This normalizes a child's grief experience and helps them feel less confused and alone.

GOOD BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

- **Someone Special Died**, Joan Singleton Preston, 1993. (Very simple--perfect for preschoolers!)
- **Liplap's Wish**, Jonathan London and Sylvia Long, 1994. (Very simple--Rabbit misses his Grandma.)
- **Badger's Parting Gifts**, Susan Varley, 1984. (Badger dies and is missed by friends. Simple, uplifting.)
- **Everett Anderson's Goodbye**, Lucille Clifton. (Stages of grief of a young boy after his father's death.)
- **Gran-Gran's Best Trick**, Dwight Holden, 1989. (Remembering Grandma, who has died.)
- **The Saddest Time**, Nora Simon, 1986. (Story of three different losses: uncle, grandma, and friend.)
- **Nana Upstairs And Nana Downstairs**, Tomie De Paola, 1973. (Gentle book about grandma's death.)
- **Rachel and the Upside Down Heart**, Eileen Douglas, 1990. (A young girl grieves for her father.)
- **Saying Goodbye To Daddy**, Judith Vigna, 1991. (Also a beautiful story about a girl and her father.)
- **What's Heaven?** Maria Shriver, Golden Books, 1999. (Beautiful, simple explanation of heaven.)

The Funeral Service: *Should My Child Go?*

The question of whether your child should attend the funeral or memorial service is a highly personal one. It depends very much on your individual child and your particular values. However, give it serious consideration.

Children Find Rituals Comforting

We all experience our children being comforted by rituals in their lives. Holidays, family traditions, when and how we do something "at our house," bedtime routines, religious observances--all these things quickly become important ritual markers in a child's life. In fact, children become upset if they are changed. Rituals serve to ground us in meaning. They give us a feeling of safety in a chaotic world. They provide us with a sense of continuity to our past, present, and future. They give us the security of family, friends, and community around us. A funeral or memorial service can be an important ritual for a child.

The Funeral: Commemorating a Life and Saying Goodbye

A funeral is a rite of separation. It is a parting experience. It transforms the process of denial to reality. It is also a community commemoration of the life of the one who has died. If children do not attend the funeral of a loved one, it may be difficult for them to find the appropriate time or place to say good-bye. It may also make it all the more difficult for them to understand and let go. Being denied the opportunity to say goodbye may even harm older children. Also, the purpose of a funeral is more than religious. It is for the entire community to confer group strength. We learn that we are not alone. A child who does not attend the funeral is deprived the healing support of the community "putting its arms around the family" in love. Actually, it is the child who is excluded from this experience who can suffer the most. Rather than feeling safe and protected, he feels isolated and abandoned. This can leave scars. We often see adults today who still angrily remember being shut out from a funeral or from the discussion of a loved one's death. Children can also be offered the opportunity to participate in the ceremony of farewell, which can further help them to say goodbye.

A Child's Choice

Invite (or encourage) your child to join you in coming to the service, but don't insist that he come. Let him know that you would be pleased to have him with you. If you are anxious about him coming, be careful that you don't unconsciously make up your child's mind by saying "*You don't want to come, do you?*" Describe what will happen at the service. Tell him that he does not have to participate if he doesn't feel like it. Tell him that there will be people there that he knows. Let your child know that people may be sad and cry, and that he himself may feel sad and cry. That's okay. Or, he may not feel sad and that's okay, too. A child may or may not want to visit the funeral home. Some children may just want to drive by to see where the body is located. Others may want to sign the book at the funeral home or leave notes or drawings for the family.

Prepare A Child For What Will Happen

Tell your child: "*A funeral is a way to say goodbye and thank you and we love you to the person who has died.*" Talk about how there will be lots of people there, and lots of telling the story of the person's life and death. "*Telling helps the sad get better.*" Describe the church or funeral home, the casket (if there is one) with the body in it and flowers all around it. Tell how people will sit together and the family may sit in a place just for them. There may be music, and a talk by a minister/priest/rabbi, and some prayers and a short talk about the person who has died. People will probably cry. "*It may seem long to you, but it will be over soon. And you will feel better because you went to the funeral and said goodbye.*" Then you can describe the burial, if there is one. *Tell Me, Papa by*

Joy and Marv Johnson (order from the Centering Corporation) is an excellent book explaining just what happens at a funeral, the burial, and it even explains cremation. It would be very helpful for a child before attending a funeral service.

Grief is a spiral of feelings, seasons, and experiences. It is not a straight line with a beginning and end. The process of grief is healing the pain and keeping the treasured memories within your heart.

(Author Unknown)

The Grieving Process: *Steps To A Child's Recovery*

Denial:

The child believes the dead person will come back. *"I don't think she died..."*

Anger:

The child expresses strong feelings of being abandoned and rejected by the person who has died. The child may express these feelings through misbehaviors and acting out. *"I hate the doctor for making Mommy die. I'll never go to the doctor again!"*

Bargaining:

The child tries to negotiate different outcomes. *"If only I had... Maybe if... It's all my fault..."*

Grief:

The child mourns over the loss. She cries often, is clingy, and feels worried, fearful, and despondent. *"I miss Mommy...I'm scared Daddy will die, too."*

Acceptance:

Gradually, the child returns to more typical behaviors and attitudes. She comes to a new understanding of herself and her place in the world. *"I know I'll never see her, but I can talk to her in my heart."*

Guidelines for Parents:

Helping Your Child Cope with Death & Loss

Understand that mourning and sadness are appropriate for people of all ages! Numbness, denial, panic, anger, and physical illness are all variations on the theme of pain. These are NORMAL on the journey of grief. But everyone handles grief differently.

Children will be able to deal with only a small amount of feelings at a time. They may show intense emotion one minute and may laugh and play the next. This does not mean they don't care. Children should never be made to feel guilty that they are not grieving enough. Grief is very personal. There is no timetable for grieving. A child's silence does not mean that he is not feeling anything. A child may need time and support to put his feelings into words.

The following symptoms are common in children: Rushes of anxiety and worry, separation anxiety, heightened fears, confusion, difficulty with sleep patterns, regression in behaviors, stomach upsets, loss of appetite, acting-out, refusal to cooperate, sullenness, acting as though nothing has happened, "blunted" feeling responses, withdrawal, and disinterest in play and usual activities.

Keep a child's life and daily routines as predictable as possible. More than anything, routines and predictability give a child a sense of security. When faced with losses and emotional upheavals, it is especially important to keep the child's world the same to assure him of its constancy and safety. This is not a time to introduce other new changes into a child's life. Keep life as much the same as possible.

Do not be afraid to talk about the traumatic event. Children do not benefit from "not thinking about it" or "putting it out of their minds." If a child sees that his parents or caretakers are uncomfortable or upset about the event, they will not bring it up. In the long run, this makes the child's recovery more difficult.

Be honest, open and clear. Talk openly about what has happened. Take the forbidden words like "death" or "cancer" off the taboo list. Don't use stories or fairy tales as explanations for facts. Always tell the truth. A child's greatest need is for trust and truth from their own parent.

Say what you have to say and trust that your child is listening. Even if he doesn't show it, have faith that he's really taking something in! Settle for a string of short conversations.

Be prepared to discuss the details again and again and again. Expect to hear things from your child that indicate that he didn't "hear" you when you told him the first time. The powerful pervasive implications of death or loss can be an overwhelming traumatic event for a child. Normal responses may include emotional numbing, avoidance, regression, anger, fear of the unknown, helplessness and confusion.

Patiently repeat honest facts for your child. If you don't know the specifics of something, tell your child. Help your child explore possible explanations. And let him understand that you and others can and often must live with many unknowns. But there are also things we do know and understand. Bring positive memories, images, and recollections of the loved one into conversations.

Use age appropriate language and explanations. Know that in the time immediately following a loss or separation, a child will be much less "available" to receive and process information. As a child gets further and further away from the event, he will be able to process and understand more. During this long process, the child will have opportunities to re-experience the loss again and again. In the long run, if a child is helped to take in the truth appropriately, he will be helped to develop a mature understanding of the loss.

Children have different concepts of death at different ages. Don't associate death with going to sleep or children will become afraid of going to sleep themselves. Because children fear abandonment, any major loss in a child's life will trigger fears that they will lose their parent. For this reason, it is not unusual to see clinging and regressive behavior, which is their attempt to hold onto their safety.

Help children avoid false reasoning about the cause of the event and give new information to correct any misunderstandings. Young children often make false assumptions about the causes of major events. Unfortunately, they often assume that they were at fault for the event--whether it be a divorce or the loss of a loved one. Adults often assume that the cause is clear (a car accident) but the child may think that "Mom died in a car accident because she was coming to pick me up!" Explore the child's sense of causality. Be very clear. Correct and clarify when you see false reasoning. Over time, the child will develop a better understanding. Don't let a child develop the sense that there is a secret about the event since this can be very destructive.

Whether they bring up the issue of guilt or not, always reassure children that they are NOT to blame! "Nothing you said or did caused baby Matthew to die. He was born with a very weak heart that couldn't do the work it needed to do to help him stay alive. Even being mad at him didn't make him die!" One of the ways children manage their overwhelming feelings when faced with a significant loss in their lives is to blame themselves, which gives them a twisted sense of control. Believing that they are responsible (that they caused the death) makes the event seem less random and frightening.

Help children assimilate the event by sequencing and ordering it. This helps a child feel less fragmented. Walk them through it: this happened...and then this...and then this. "So, you were staying at Aunt Mary's house, playing with your cousins...and then Daddy came and told you that Grandpa had died...and then you ran out and hid in the garage. You were feeling very scared and very sad..."

Help children put things into perspective. Give a child the bigger picture. They can't always see it, because they only see things from their personal perspective. For example, say: "Bad things happen and people can be hurtful, but most people are kind and caring."

Allow children to express their feelings. Help them to call their feelings by their rightful names. If they are angry, say "Boy, you are **REALLY** angry right now!" It's not the expression of these feelings that is harmful. It's the suppression of feelings that causes long-term psychic injury to a child!

"Children can withstand many difficulties, including war, trauma, and the death of a parent, and end up emotionally healthy as long as they have at least one caring adult who sees them through the hardship."

(J. Greenberg, Seeing Children Through Tragedy)

Help them talk about their fears. It is important to reassure a child who is facing or has faced a separation or loss. Let them express their fears and ask questions. Keep in mind that their sense of security has been shattered. Young children will worry and wonder: "Who will take care of me if you die?" or "Who will take care of me if I die?" Make no promises that you cannot keep. Let them know that if you die, there will be

someone else to take care of them. Children feel that if one person dies or goes away, anyone (including themselves) could or might die. It is important for them to be able to voice these fears and to be comforted that loved ones will do their best to stay alive and that there is no immediate danger (if that is the truth) in the immediate future. Then, gently move the child back into a normal routine, step by step, as he is ready.

Encourage children express their intense emotions in active, creative ways. Help them put their feelings into words through story, songs, and puppets. Help them release feelings by painting, pounding clay, playing with sand/water, hammering nails, running, and climbing.

Expect some repetitive play that has themes of death or loss. Dramatic play offers children a way to work out their feelings about what has happened through play. In play, children are able to move from "passive to active." They shift from being in the position of a helpless victim to the role of action and mastery. However, if you see your child engaging in post-traumatic play that often lacks pleasure and relief, it may signal that he is stuck and cannot move forward without help. Talk to a professional for feedback.

Remember that surviving children often feel guilty. Often this comes from false assumptions children develop about the event. Guilt is often best observed in self-hatred and self-destructive tendencies in children. The problem is that a child will not be able to put into words that he is feeling guilty and thus feeling worthless. It is important to know that a child surviving a parent's sudden death will have great survivor guilt. They think: "There must be something bad about me..." or, "I should have been there to do something."

Children may need specific permission to go on, to play and have fun again. They need help in understanding that returning to normal activities is all right and that moving on is not forgetting.

Grief is normal; persisting grief reactions are not. If a grief symptom persist beyond six months, or if they interfere with a child's functioning, they need to be addressed. Sometimes, professional help is needed.

Don't avoid the topic when the child brings it up. It is most helpful if adults around a child are available when the child wants to talk but avoid probing when the child doesn't want to talk. This may mean just answering one question. Or, it may mean struggling with very difficult questions. Don't be surprised if in the middle of your answer your child returns to play and acts disinterested. He may have been able to tolerate all the emotional intensity he can handle for the moment, and he is avoiding taking on more anxiety in his own adaptive way. Just trust that he did take in what was important, even if he doesn't show it!

Children will sense if the topic is emotionally difficult for the adults around them. And, they will try to please them, either by avoiding emotional topics or by persisting with topics which they sense the adults find more pleasant. Try to assess your own discomfort level. Talk about this with a child. Your verbal acknowledgment of sadness or anger can be reassuring for a child.

Be available, nurturing, and predictable. Do your best to be available, loving, supportive and predictable. All these things make the child's work easier. They feel safer and cared for. Give assurances of your love and support. The greatest gift a parent can give to a child is the gift of themselves. This can be hard, though, when parents are grieving too. Remember to use touch and holding. These are great comforters. Be willing to listen! Children need to talk, not just to be talked to!

Major losses will forever change a child's life. The child has the life-long task of working and reworking, experiencing and re-experiencing, the loss. In the case of lost loved ones (through separation/death/divorce), each holiday--each family occasion--will bring the loss and the ghosts of the loved one to the child. Available, nurturing parents or caretakers can make the child's journey easier.

Inform important adults in the child's world about what has happened. Let teachers and parents of a child's friends know (if appropriate) of some of the pain of the child. Sometimes this can allow the people in the child's life to give them a small amount of tolerance or understanding or nurturing that will smooth the way for them. If you encounter intolerance or callousness ("Isn't it about time they got over this?"), don't be shy about educating them.

Expect unusual "sensory" experiences. Over the six months following the loss, both children and adults will often experience unusual visual or auditory or tactile sensations. A child may think they hear the person's voice--or think they saw them in the crowd. These misperceptions are common. These may be disturbing to parents and the child. Reassure the child. Some people interpret these "visions" in a religious context, and a child will say: "He came back to tell me it was OK." This can be important for a child and there is no reason to undermine his feelings. They are quite common and are unfortunately mislabeled as hallucinations.

Don't be afraid to express your own emotions of grief. If you repress your feelings, your children will be more likely to hold onto their own emotions. Children receive permission to mourn from adults. To be able to show tears and mourn openly can help children to accept the naturalness of loss.

Don't subtly ask your child to take care of you. Stay in the parent role and help your child to stay the child. Don't treat your child as a substitute adult or surrogate friend/confidante/spouse. Talk to supportive friends when you are overwhelmed.

Offer healing activities. Many parents find that encouraging their child to do one of the following activities will help their child feel relieved. Any time a child can do something active, it helps him move forward. He will feel less stuck and less helpless.

<p>HEALING ACTIVITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ <i>Write a Letter</i> (to say goodbye, to express feelings, or send to the family)◆ <i>Send off a Balloon</i>◆ <i>Make a List</i> (write down a child's memories of the person as they surface)◆ <i>Blow Bubbles.</i>◆ <i>Look At Old Photos Together</i> (talk about what your child remembers)◆ <i>Say a Prayer</i>◆ <i>Make a Memory Book</i> (use pictures or drawings)◆ <i>Plant a Flower or Tree</i>◆ <i>Write a Book About the Person</i> (all the wonderful things they did)◆ <i>Make Cookies or a Cake</i>◆ <i>Make a Memory Box.</i> (fill it with reminders of the person)◆ <i>Light a Special Candle</i>◆ <i>Make A Mural or Collage</i> (about the person's life)◆ <i>Frame a picture of the person</i> (and give it to your child)◆ <i>Give your child a memento of the person</i> (a concrete connection)◆ <i>Draw a picture.</i> (feelings? special times?)

Seek help if you feel you need help dealing with your children during a crisis. Sorrow hits us all and sometimes we need help when our personal resources are depleted. There are well-trained therapists who can help you and your child with the grief process. Support groups are available as well.

<p>SOME EXCELLENT RESOURCES</p>	
<p><i>The Center For Living With Dying</i> 554 Mansion Park Drive Santa Clara, CA 95054 (408) 980-9801 Grief counseling and peer support groups.</p>	<p><i>The Centering Corporation</i> 1531 N. Saddle Creek Rd. Omaha, Nebraska 68104 (402) 553-1200 Great selection of books and tapes on grief</p>
<p><i>Compassionate Friends</i> (408) 252-1317 (referral to meetings) Support for families who have lost children.</p>	<p><i>HAND</i> (408) 732-3228 <i>Helping after neonatal death.</i></p>

Remember that a loss will always remain a loss, but over time--with love and understanding--children can heal and evolve into a mature experience of loss. Feel free to call me at any time for consultation and support.

<p><i>After A Loss, Children Need:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To feel as safe and secure as possible.• Special one-on-one attention and physical comfort.• Regular rules and consistent routines.• Comforting objects and "loveys" kept close at hand.• Ways to express their feelings and concern (Stories, dramatic play, art, puppets, sand/water play)• Flexible expectations from adults.• Time to recover. (Note: it may take weeks or months for children to express and work through their feelings.)

Adults Can Help Children Heal After A Loss:

- Minimize changes and keep routines predictable.
- Express emotional and physical affection.
- Expect repetitive play (children are “working it through”).
- Anticipate and acknowledge the child’s fears.
(“Name it, so we can tame it...”)
- Listen with empathy & attentiveness: accept & reflect back the child’s feelings.
- Let go of a need to “fix” the problem.
- Encourage open discussion of the event or experience.
- Clarify facts, details, and information.
- Expect temporary regression and difficult behaviors.
- Set clear limits in a positive way.
- Limit exposure to violence and fearful situations (TV, media, adult talk).
- Have emotional courage to go through grief with the child.
- Know that grief can “trigger” unresolved losses from the past.
- Give hope and send empowering messages. (“You can make it...I’m here.”)
- Remember that healing is a process, not an event.

Sources:

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