



How to be a Compassionate Friend for Children

Times when children grieve

- When a parent/sibling or grandparent dies or goes away
- When parents separate or a family breaks up
- Loss of a friend or friendship
- Loss of a pet
- Having a disability
- Loss of memories due to fire or flood
- Loss of culture and homeland when moving to a new country
- Moving house or changing schools
- Long periods of separation from a parent
- Being in hospital

Common signs of grieving in children

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Anger and angry play
- Vivid memories
- Sadness and longing
- Physical complaints
- Sleep difficulty
- Eating problems
- Being destructive
- Acting like a younger child
- Not being able to concentrate
- Problems with school work
- Being easily upset
- Being “mean” to others
- Acting more like an adult
- Temper tantrums
- Being unhappy
- Idolising the ‘lost one’
- Crying and giggling
- Need for adults
- Running away

How pre– school children perceive death

- When death is explained as “sleep” or “a long trip” they may expect the deceased to wake up or return
- A child who was angry at his mother before her death may believe he is responsible for the death
- Young children need to ask questions about the death again and again

How primary school aged children perceive death

- Children of this age know that death is permanent and that everything dies. They often are very curious about physical details
- These children need physical, tangible ways to experience and express grief. Rituals such as visitations, funerals and memorial services are very important
- Children accept their parents’ religious beliefs. A belief in life after death generally comforts children if that concept has been part of their religious beliefs before the death
- Boys tend to have more difficulty talking about death and showing their feelings

How an adolescent or senior student perceives death

- Children of this age will be looking for straight answers
- They will appreciate you not hiding your sorrow – this will give them permission to grieve
- They will need time to come to terms with their loss
- They will have an understanding of the burial process, but may have questions on cremation. They will view the whole subject of burial or cremation as “scary”. Tell them the truth and arrange to have suitable literature available in the school library
- They will appreciate a visit to the home if a close family member has died

Talking to children about death

If one on one:

- Check with the parent/guardian first

If the topic arises in class, there are gentle ways to explain death:

- “When someone dies, that means their body is no longer working”
- “The heart stops beating, they no longer need to eat or sleep and they no longer feel any pain”
- “They don’t need their body any longer. That means we will never see them again as we could before”

The DO's in dealing with bereaved children

Needs directly after the death:

- Support from immediate family
- Being able & encouraged to talk
- Support from friends
- Support from extended family

In the longer term:

- As above plus:
- Memories (including photos, videos, rituals)
- Support groups

The DON'T's in dealing with bereaved children

- Insensitive and uninformed comments
- Exposure to parents' strong grief reactions
- Being pressured to talk
- Unhelpful school responses (sometimes lack of empathy or acknowledgement)
- Disenfranchisement of children's grief (responses implying that the children were "too young to understand", speaking about them as though they were not there or could not understand, pressuring them to "control" their grief, being left out and even being lied to – *"Beyond the Death of a Child"* p 53

What Not To Say To Children & Why Not

"Your father was a good man, Bernard, god loved your father so much he took him to heaven"

A young person's immature concept of god is easily distorted. S/he may decide to refrain from being good, fearing s/he could also be called heaven.

"Be strong for your mother, and your brothers and sisters."

No student should ever be made to think s/he must assume the role of the dead parent. A young person cannot sacrifice feelings or disguise emotions for the same of other grieving family members.

"The ways of god are a mystery. It was God's will."

God is a creator of life, not a taker of life. Our bodies succumb to illness, disease, and accident or outside forces.

"I know just how you feel Bernard."

The grief of each student is unique, even though the circumstances of death may appear similar. Many young people have a hard enough time expressing themselves; suggesting that our feelings and responses are identical only closes the door to the grieving student verbalising his/her fear and pain. No-one can know how another individual feels, we can only imagine. It may be well chosen to say "I don't know what you are feeling, but I care about your pain. If you would like to talk, I will listen."

"Trust god Bernard, he always has a good reason for what he does."

The young person needs to be assured that God does not cause death to teach us a lesson, and a young person will find no plausible reason good enough to explain a parent's or siblings death.

"It was for the best that your father didn't live. He is better off not suffering."

A student may prefer to have a suffering father; a father to touch, talk with, ask questions of, rather than no father at all.

"I could never handle this as well as you."

Putting the grieving student on a pedestal leaves him nowhere to turn after the inevitable fall. The grieving student needs to respond (but usually can't): "if you see me as handling this death, you are distorting the picture, I am barely hanging on."

"You just need a little time."

Time does not always heal; it is what the person does with the time that is important.

Grieving is hard work. It is insulting to minimise what the grieving student is facing. That "little time" involves years of yearning, wishing, and wondering what life would have been like with a mother, father, sibling included.

"Your father would want you to be brave."

Bravery is a cumbersome burden to carry when one's heart is breaking. A son or daughter needs to hear, "your father loved you, and would not wish you to be brave. Your father would want caring adults to remain available to you and comfort you. He would want you to identify and acknowledge your feelings, so you might work through your grief and, eventually, arrive at a place of acceptance."

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