

Children and Grief Handout

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What is Grief?

Grief is the natural and normal response to loss of any kind. It's the conflicting feelings caused by the end or change in a familiar pattern of behavior. Over time the pain of unresolved grief is cumulative. Children carry unresolved grief into adulthood. Incomplete recovery can have a lifelong negative affect on one's capacity for happiness.

Six Myths about Grief

1. Don't feel bad.

Show children, by example, that it's natural to feel badly when they experience a loss in their lives—not only death, but also divorce and moving, as well as loss of trust, safety, and control of their own bodies (physical or sexual abuse). Grief experts remind us that “Grief is about a broken heart, not a broken brain. All efforts to heal the heart with the head fail.” Saying “Don’t feel bad” belittles a child’s natural and normal reaction to a loss.

2. Replace the loss.

Kids are taught how to acquire things, but not what to do when they lose them. Honor the uniqueness of the relationship changed by loss, and don't rush the child to fill the void with another pet, a new parent, another friend. Nothing “new” can take away the pain.

3. Grieve alone.

When adults fail to show their own grief in front of others, children learn to grieve alone. “Giving a child space” or “leaving him alone” are the opposite of what a grieving child needs—to be heard, to be hugged, to be validated that their grief is a normal and natural response to loss, and that it is shared by you.

4. Be strong for others.

This is one of the most confusing messages children receive, because it is undoable. Grievers need permission to cry, to not cry, to act out, to withdraw, to eat or not eat, to fall apart. There is no “right way” to grieve. But if you try to “be strong” for

children, they will learn that they must “be strong” for you—a wholly unhelpful response when one is processing and healing from grief.

5. Keep busy.

Keeping busy may distract children from loss, but it will not heal their pain or make them feel better. It does not deal with the underlying feelings and can lead to harmful compulsive behaviors—TV-watching, video games, binge-eating, any behavior that distances a child from their normal and natural emotions. Don’t push a child to be busy. Follow their lead in what they feel like doing after a loss. As healthy outlets for airing their feelings, encourage them to write, to paint, to talk to you or others.

6. Just give it time.

There’s a big difference between time healing all wounds and a wound healing with time. The passage of time, without action on the part of the griever, does not complete the grief process. It is how the child deals with his loss, over time, that helps him heal. Time itself does nothing. Look at all the adults who still grieve over something that happened when they were children.

What to Say or Not Say about Death

- 1. Don’t say “I know how you feel.”** *You can’t. Each relationship is unique. Instead, share your own feelings.*
- 2. Don’t try to change the subject.** *Listen to the griever’s pain and stay in the moment. Don’t shift the focus from feelings to intellect. Don’t imply that the griever should not feel what they are feeling. Do not be afraid to talk about the person who died; it helps.*
- 3. Don’t try to “fix” the griever.** *Grieving people need to be heard, not fixed. Let the person talk, cry, vent, fall apart. Be with them as a caring presence, but don’t do or say anything to try to make them feel better.*
- 4. Don’t talk “around” death.** *Don’t use euphemisms—“he’s gone to sleep,” “he passed away,” “we’ve lost her,” “God called him home.” These messages are confusing to a child, who may come to fear sleeping as well as God. Tell the truth: “He died. And we believe that after he died, he went to be with God (or whatever one believes).” Avoid all metaphors because children do not always have the ability to match reality with metaphorical images.*

Do offer children age-appropriate books that portray death and dying authentically—books that don’t perpetuate the Six Myths—rather than euphemistically or melodramatically. Well-chosen novels should first tell a riveting story, while also modeling “healthy grieving” in a context of safety.

Resources: *When Children Grieve* and *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, both by John W. James and Russell Friedman, published in paperback by Harper Perennial; American Hospice Foundation (www.americanhospice.org)