

Bereavement Services

Helping children deal with grief

When a loved one is admitted into hospice, a common concern of many families is how to explain illness and death to children who are losing someone they love.

Understandably, deciding what is best for the children is often complicated by the fact that the adults in their world are having trouble sorting out their own feelings. Your Hospice team is eager to support you in this part of the dying process just as in all the other changes you are facing as a family. Chaplains, social workers and counselors in the bereavement program have a wealth of experience and resources on hand to help you and your children explore the thoughts and emotions surrounding the death of a loved one. We can help you develop an approach to talking and playing and being present for your children that is appropriate to their age, development and temperament.

We know that you are your child's first teachers and most ardent advocates and that you know them better than anyone else. There is much you can do to relieve your child's distress by simply trusting your own instincts. Here are a few general points to keep in mind as you guide a child through the process of grieving in a way that seems right for them and for your family.

Euphemisms like "Grandma passed" or we "lost your sister" or even "Dad is in a better place" might confuse or frighten a child. Use language that is clear and direct. So much of what your child is experiencing is unsteady to them so you want to be able to provide an anchor. Honest and truthful explanations are always the safe bet. "Grandma did not get better from her illness, and we are all very sad that she has died" or "Your sister was very strong but her disease could not be cured and she died today" or "Dad died last night, and while we will miss him forever, we believe that we will all be together again one day in heaven" are typically better choices. While we think that

the euphemisms might ease the pain of our child they are often ways that we manage or mask our own grief rather than opening the opportunity for dialogue with the child.

Adding confusion to the crazy mix of thoughts and feelings of grief can prolong the process of grieving.

By junior high age, concepts such as death being inevitable, and the abstract notion of loved ones living on in our hearts or in our memories are readily understood.

Sometimes the understanding of this finality can make the loss more difficult to process, especially during this awkward age of so many changes. Extra attention and patience with emotional extremes should be exercised by the adults in the child's world.

For children of any age and developmental level, remember to ask if there is any confusion or any questions remaining when you talk. Let the child know that over time you will remain available to talk more.

Nothing should be off limits. Plan to repeat yourself as needed; the stress of grief can interfere with a child's ability to retain and/or process the information given to them.

Touch, either affectionate or in the context of activities like wrestling, can also serve to steady a child when words are just not enough. Your best attempts at unconditional positive regard will also help to settle a grieving child.

Involve your child in the funeral or rituals of remembrance in whatever way and to whatever degree seems comfortable to you both. You may elect to have young children present for only part of the rituals around the death. Grade school age children might like to read a poem specially written about the deceased or a text written out by the family. Teens might want to tell stories and share memories. If a child of any age becomes upset at being encouraged to participate in formal rites of passage, resist the temptation to force their participation in

such rituals as viewing the body or reading at the service or even standing in a receiving line. Each child needs to feel some sense of self-advocacy and control when their world is being shaken. Saying “no” might be all they can manage.

Children will learn to express their feelings more easily if you are open to expressing your own. You can model self-care by taking life a bit more slowly, engaging in pleasant activities like walking with friends or simply letting friends bring meals and take children for play dates. Doing familiar and pleasant things can be useful in calming and reinforcing the reality that much of life will not change in spite of grief. It is also important for you to be honest with your child about your own grief and the emotions that emanate from you in its wake. This not only keeps your child from the anxiety of not understanding shifts in family functioning but also gives you the opportunity to normalize the tears a child is holding back or the anger that they are feeling.

Withdrawal, acting out and being unusually “grown up” are common reactions in children of all ages. A child’s personal history with death and grieving, even with relatively small losses like a friend not being in their class, might be predictors of how they will behave now. While you do want to exercise as much compassion as possible, do not hesitate to address these behaviors. The resultant conversations could well be the most direct route to your child’s heart. Ask as many questions as the child will tolerate and be more concerned with listening and being fully present than with having all the right answers. Moods will shift and feelings will be confusing. It is normal to observe a cascade of different and sometimes extreme emotional expression in your child. Hysterical crying might quickly shift to acting like nothing has happened with friends and then suddenly to being sealed off in a bedroom for hours. Grieving erratically is normal. In the extreme it might slow the process but generally speaking, a

child will move through the predictable stages of grief nonetheless and you need not worry. It can be very healthy for you and your child to take breaks from grieving to do something fun or to reinstate some aspects of normal life that have slipped with the illness and death of their loved one.

Inform your child’s teacher and appropriate school staff of the situation at home as early in the process as possible. They can be wonderful resources as you navigate this season of loss and grief. Most schools have social workers and psychologists who are trained to work with students struggling with significant losses. Since these professionals are not themselves actively grieving, they can sometimes be more emotionally available or seem safer to talk to about the death and how they are reacting to it. Be sure to let your child know that you are telling people at school since being singled out makes most children uncomfortable. Feeling different can plague children of all ages but if the child’s world can join the family in embracing a loved one’s death as part of the new normal, this can ultimately be very cathartic.

As well as you know your child and want to be able to guide them effectively through their grief mindful of these tips, sometimes, for various personal reasons, grief is just more complicated and healing more elusive. If at any point in the process—which can take anywhere from weeks to months and occasionally longer—you feel overwhelmed at the task of guiding your child through their grief, remember that your Hospice team remains available to you and can be an invaluable resource.