

HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN DEAL WITH LOSS

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All children experience some type of loss in their lives. Many children have a family pet that dies or a friend who moves. All families also will eventually experience the loss of a family member through a death or divorce. The severity of a child's reaction to loss is affected by how much of their personal security was invested in the lost person or situation. In the event of a major loss (separation from a parent), children tend to show symptoms of acute grief for 6-12 weeks (intense crying, sleeping and eating disturbances, change in activity level, feelings of hopelessness/guilt/anger). Extreme physical symptoms of sleep and appetite disturbance usually diminish within 10-21 days; but it may take two years before a major loss is completely resolved and accepted.

Stages of Grieving

There are stages of grief that everyone goes through and a pathway through the grieving process. Progress through the grieving process means that people move through the five stages. Sometimes there is a step forward and back along the way and some people get stuck in a stage for a long time. These five stages of grief do not happen to everyone in exactly the same order; but most people go through each of these in one way or another.

1. Denial and Shock: Protest and Numbness

In this initial stage, people try to stop the loss from occurring or deny that the loss has occurred.

2. Bargaining

At this stage we feel that we can make a deal and make the situation go away.

3. Acting Out: Anger and Fear Turned Outward

At this stage comes the realization that the loss has occurred and cannot be undone.

4. Depression and Sadness: Anger Turned Inward

The depression seen at this stage is often less visible than acting out but these feelings are equally important to manage.

5. Understanding and Coping: Acceptance

Letting go of the powerful feelings of grief.

All losses affect children and impact their lives.

Mourning is a psychological process and consists of hard, emotional work. Adults can help children understand the loss and cope with the overwhelming feelings. Parents often feel unable to help children deal with losses. Either they, too, are in the grieving process or they just do not know how to help their children cope with it. There are some general pointers which can be used in situations of loss:

Begin with the child's experience of loss Ask the child what they think happened, how and why. Model for them some questions to ask and make some out-loud guesses about how the child might be feeling.

We need to help children tell their story of loss.

Allow them to tell their story completely. We can learn by listening what is confused, misunderstood, or scary to the child.

Remembering builds clear boundaries for people: a concept of "that was then and this is now."

Remembering together helps children put words to thoughts so we can learn from them what's confused, misunderstood, and scary.

Establish a trusting relationship Be a responsive and available adult. Use body language and eye contact to communicate attunement.

Spend some one-on-one time with and be available to children as much as possible and especially when they seem to need attention.

Talk to children about how they are feeling validate and respect all feelings. Children's body language, facial expression, and behavior tell a lot about the child's internal state. Reflect what the child is not able to say to you.

Answer children's questions Children will answer questions for themselves in a way that is confusing and frightening if we do not help them understand. Children often blame themselves and we need to help them to understand the real causes.

Be honest. Tell children what's happening. Children overhear conversations. They need us to say what is happening.

Use the correct words instead of using terms such as "passed away" or "sleeping." Children take things literally and these terms only serve to confuse them.

Read a book on the topic to children Children find it easy to identify with characters in stories and the book can help them process the event.

Prepare children for what is going to happen Like adults, children feel more secure when they know what to expect.

A concrete experience (such as burying the deceased pet) helps make the event more real, lets the child be an active participant, and creates a tangible memory.

Planting a flower over the plot once again emphasizes the concreteness of the event and represents the cycle of life. The child can now care for the plant in order to represent the feelings they had for the lost pet or person.

Establish comfortable routines and rituals for transitions and separations.

Allow children to keep objects (such as jewelry, articles of clothing, photos) that remind them of the lost person or pet. Young children need concrete reminders in order to hold the loss in their mind. Separations and losses are easier when the child has a concrete object to remember them by.

Children act out . . . when the hurt is too great they cry. We need to be aware of this and support them with their complicated feelings.

Children play out their concerns in order to master them (such as making graves for dead bugs or having their dolls die). This helps them feel more in control, and therefore, more secure.

Children will often fill themselves with food and hoard or loot possessions after a loss.

Bend to little things. Instead, focus on the major difficulties the child is having.

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