

GRIEF & LOSS

Quotes

*By helping children put their feelings outside of themselves we can facilitate their healing.
Sharing feelings diminishes the hurt.*

— Brekning the Silence

Loss is a part of everyone's life. It is not the event itself—the type of loss—that determines one's response to it. Each person reacts to a loss in his own way.

— Christy Callahan

Notes

Grief happens in response to the loss of something or someone. Most of the time when we think of grief and loss we think of the hurt that follows the death of a loved-one or a pet. Such losses are especially tough on children, but they can also grieve because of divorce, having to move from a favorite school, or losing a best friend who moves away. Children who grieve often encounter problems with sleeping, eating, stomach aches, headaches, crying spells, bed-wetting, immature behaviors, lack of energy, separation anxiety, and behavior and academic issues at school.

Children travel through several stages of healing after experiencing the death of someone they love:

- 1) **Denial.** At first they do not want to believe that it happened. It can't be true. The dead person or pet will return.
- 2) **Bargaining.** Children may think they were to blame for the death. A grieving child may think, "God, if I behave better will you bring Uncle Seth back?"
- 3) **Depression:** A child may have several days of sadness, crying, physical ailments, and a desire to be alone or clingy.
- 4) **Anger:** Child may be angry with God, the doctor, the hospital, or family members. The child may blame others for the death.
- 5) **Acceptance.** Eventually the child realizes the dead person, or pet, is not coming back and they begin to return to a somewhat normal life.

Parents and teachers have to be conscious of each child's age as they help the child cope with death. Infants and toddlers have almost no concept of death. Preschoolers often think death is reversible. Elementary-age children start to comprehend the finality of death. Students in middle school understand death and they may act-out in an attempt to cope. High school students fully grasp the meaning of death and they tend to seek out friends and family for support.

Recommended Resources

- Mommy, "What's Died" The Butterfly Story
- Ava Meets Amigo, The Teardrop
- A Rainbow of Hope
- Good Grief



Strategies

1. Acknowledge their feelings. Let them know that it is normal to cry and feel sad.
2. Empathize. Say, "I know it hurts." Share your feelings with the child.
3. Respect the child's coping strategies. Some children will want to talk about their feelings while others desire to keep to themselves.
4. Use honest, concrete statements. Say, "Grandma died today." Don't use confusing terms like, "She passed away, She is sleeping, or She was taken from us."
5. Some children will be curious and ask questions about death, heaven, God, and funerals. Answer them as honestly as possible. How would you answer this question, "Mom, do dogs go to heaven?"
6. Encourage child to start a journal to record feelings and to write about good memories of the deceased.
7. Allow child to express himself through artwork.
8. Help the child create a collage of items that positively represents the person who died.
9. Suggest to the child to write a poem to place on her wall. The poem can focus on positive memories.
10. Encourage the child to keep a picture in his wallet or on his desk to remember his loss.
11. Some children fear that they will die soon. Reassure them that they are safe and very unlikely to die soon.
12. Keep child active in her sports, clubs, church, hobbies and interests. This helps to redirect some of her focus away from the recent traumatic event.
13. With young children expect some immature behaviors to occur. They may be clingy, wet the bed, or suck their thumbs. Don't make a big issue out of these behaviors. They will eventually cease.
14. Many adolescents prefer to talk to their friends instead of their parents about their losses. Don't take it personally!
15. Provide the child with a list of "neutral" persons she can talk to. The list can include the pastor, counselor, coach, or teacher.
16. Parents need to use their best judgment when deciding if their children are old enough to attend funerals. Many experts believe that children need to attend if they wish. By not allowing children to attend it could create an environment of denial that does not allow them to actively participate in the grieving process.
17. Consider letting the child place a personal item or two in the coffin.
18. If the child wishes, take him to visit the grave site. Leave some flowers.
19. Burn a candle every year on the deceased person's birthday.
20. Have child plant a tree or grow a flower garden as a memorial tribute.
21. Create holiday traditions. For example, purchase a Christmas tree ornament in memory of the person and let the child hang in on the tree every year.
22. Parents and teachers may need to be flexible with schoolwork and homework assignments during the grieving period.
23. School counselors can schedule bereavement groups to help these children.
24. Teachers can give the child permission to leave the room or call home when she gets sad.
25. Respect the child's need to be alone at times, but be concerned if he becomes too reclusive.
26. Teens and some younger children who have a history of depression, chemical dependency, or suicidal tendencies need to be closely monitored. These children are at a higher risk for serious grief reactions.