

What Children Need to Heal From Their Loss

The following excerpts are taken from: *Preparing The Children* by Kathy Nussbaum

*Grieving is not weakness
Nor the absence of faith.
Grieving is as natural as
Crying when you are hurt,
Sleeping when you are tired or
Sneezing when your nose itches.
It is nature's way
Of healing a broken heart.
-Doug Manning*

1. Acknowledge their Loss

Before children can grieve the loss of someone loved, it is necessary for them to confront the reality that someone has died and will not be returning. It may take several months for them to acknowledge the death. If the information they were given was distorted or withheld from them along the way, it may take even longer. Provide the children with a meaningful way of saying good-bye to your loved one.

Some helpful ideas are: Write a good-bye note on a biodegradable helium balloon, as piece of wood to float down a river or in a bottle for the sea. Draw a good-bye picture or go to the cemetery or a special place and tell the loved one good-bye.

2. Embrace Memories

Acknowledging the death does not mean the relationship with the loved one is over. Healing involves the development of a new relationship that is based on memory rather than presence. Some cultures have meaningful traditions that include when and how to remember and honor the person who has died. However, many do not. The only way for children to find hope and healing is by embracing their memories (the good ones as well as the unpleasant ones).

Some helpful ideas: Talk freely about memories, even if it brings tears, let children pick out keepsakes from your loved one's belongings, make a scrapbook, provide a journal, art pad or work book to record memories, hang a graffiti board in the house entitled: "Things I miss about....." And each family member can contribute to the board as they wish, ask friends and relatives to talk about their memories, plant a tree or flowers in memory of loved one.

3. Feel and Express the Pain of Loss

We often want to believe that time alone will provide healing following a significant death. We quickly move the children away from uncomfortable feelings, and keep ourselves busy to avoid facing the pain of loss. However, it is moving *toward* the pain of grief that ultimately heals.

Children express pain differently at various ages and at different stages of the grieving process. (Here is a brief summary of the developmental stages. A more thorough article can be found on our website in the May 2011 Newsletter edition.)

Age 0-2: Children at this young age can have lasting vulnerabilities to separation and loss if support is not given. Provide physical comfort, accept regressive behaviors without criticism, give child a piece of clothing that still has the loved person's smell on it.

Age 2-6: Parents often perceive children at this age as being relatively unaffected by the death. They may go play shortly after hearing the news of the death and they rarely cry at first. They may act as if they aren't grieving at all. Children in this age group move toward pain primarily by using art and play. They may turn the couch into a casket, they may pretend someone has died, or they may draw angels and caskets and other death symbols. This is very healthy and should be encouraged. Encourage the children to draw pictures of what the family talks about (heaven, urns, caskets, what happens after death etc) to get a glimpse of the images they have in their minds. Give positive comments about your child's death play and art and make suggestions for further exploration. Be patient and also set limits for inappropriate behavior.

Age 7-11: By this age, children have a much greater understanding of the future and therefore what the loss will mean to them. Even though they yearn for the person who has died, they often hide their tears, because they do not want to appear childish or helpless. They are very sensitive to teasing about the death from other children. They may become fearful of sleep or darkness or worry that their own aches and pains could lead to death. Photos and objects that belonged to the person who died are particularly important for children of this age. Encourage keeping a journal, drawing pictures, writing stories, poems or music about their feelings or experiences, allow for the release of energy through physical activity, take them to a bereavement support group, model and encourage the expression of a range of emotions, set limits to aggression, accept regressive behaviors, create ways to release feelings of guilt.

Teens: Teenagers may feel they need to be strong so they can care for the rest of the family. Their pain tends to express itself through physical symptoms, depression and anger. Reckless behaviors are supposed to prove to themselves they are not vulnerable to death. This can be a very confusing time for teens as they struggle to become independent from their parents, yet suddenly find themselves feeling helpless and dependent. Talk about ways to honor someone who has died, be available but also encourage getting support from others as well, set limits but don't become too controlling, offer books, take them to support groups, give your teen a camera for capturing images that represent their grief.

4. Integrate the Death into their Lives

The death of a family member forever changes a child's understanding of the world. Healing requires that the child find meaning in the death, develop a new self-identity and reinvest his/her emotional energy into other relationships.

Whenever we lose something dear to us, we are also given an opportunity to find things in our lives we wouldn't have otherwise found. This search for meaning can take years, but it often results in a wisdom about life that can be gained only when one experiences a great loss.

Children must also redefine their roles in the family and often describe this as being a very difficult adjustment. Be careful not to expect too much from your children. They should not be expected to act like grown-ups, nor should they be encouraged to be "the man or woman of the house." Allow them to grieve normally for their age and be aware that they may feel initially that developing new relationships would be disrespectful to the person who died.

