

Tips for Helping Children Cope with Grief

The following tips are intended to help parents, family members and other caregivers provide nurturing support to children who are coping with a death.

Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and share their feelings; be a good listener.

Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings: All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. Children within the same family, even those who are close in age, may display very different reactions and have very different needs for support.

Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about a tragic event: Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.

Clarify with children what they have heard to determine whether or not they have accurate information. Rumors and misinformation can run rampant in communities coping with a death and may interfere with a child's ability to understand, respond and cope.

The death of someone in a child's community rather than a family member or close friend may not affect a child in the same way. However **providing opportunities for sharing** information and feelings may support and encourage the development of healthy life and coping skills.

Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death: Give the child information at the level that he or she can understand. **Allow the child to guide you** as to the need for more information or clarification of what he or she has heard. Children need to understand that loss and death are parts of the circle of life.

Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death: Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers. Provide answers that are as honest as you can make them, but keep your responses as simple as possible. If you do not know the answer, say so and offer to find out.

Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what responses will be helpful. If a child appears upset, let them know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need. **Giving them the time and encouragement** to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.

Be aware of your own response to the death and your need to grieve:

Focusing on the children in your care is important, but it should not come at the expense of your own emotional needs. Your ability to provide the nurturing, safe and caring support children need may be complicated by your own grief response. Seek help from friends or other family members if you feel your own grief is compromising your ability to support the children in your care. For some families, it may be helpful to seek grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support for adults and children.