

Helping Children Grieve

Unfortunately in life, we will face times when we are bereaved, but also times when we have others who are, including small children. In one of life's twists, people often find it easier to grieve themselves than to face someone in such intense grief, especially a small person who doesn't always know how to react. As always, this seems to be in part due to the fact that as a human, we cannot help but experience strong waves of emotion, but as a part of a culture that aims to suppress all things negative, we have yet to learn how to stand with grief in others. So what can we do? The following are some steps to help you cope with a child's grief in a way that will help them moving forward instead of adding to the cycle of individuals who don't know how to sit with these big emotions.

Don't focus on getting them to feel better

For most people, the immediate goal is to try and help someone feel better. We believe that is the key to everything. We offer platitudes and gifts and words of advice all in hopes of somehow making enough good feelings to overcome the negative ones. Most people are well-meaning here and like we offer children distractions when they are angry, we often try to offer even bigger distractions when they are suffering. Yet distraction not only doesn't help, but can have a negative effect of simply prolonging the grief by keeping it from being felt and released. What children need when faced with immense grief is the space to feel it.

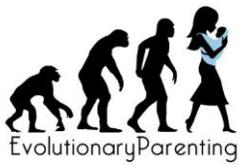
What does this look like?

As people who care, it is our role to help our kids have the safe space to simply be with the sadness. It looks as simple as telling them it's okay to cry and they don't have to say anything to you about anything. It's sitting there silently as the ones we love feel worse than they have ever felt, knowing that in time, as they feel it, it will somehow lessen. It's offering a hug, a hand, a pat, or whatever is welcomed in these moments and keeping our mouths closed when we want to say, "What can I do to help you feel better?" Because you can't do anything to actively help them feel better. Accept that and you can actually be there to help.

Recognize grief or stress in acting out

Children don't always show their struggle as sadness. More so than adults they are bound to show their sadness as anger, resistance, even violence. Often adults struggle with these expressions of grief and focus too much on trying to control or curb these behaviours. Children get yelled at, punished, and so on all for expressing the anxiety and stress they feel from whatever is going on.

It is important to note here that this the primary way you may see behaviour changes in children too young to truly comprehend what may have happened. Young children don't understand many of the events of life as we know them, but they do pick up on our behaviours and when we are grieving or



stressed, they will respond in kind, especially when we attempt to hide it. All they know at this stage is that we are not emotionally available to them and that's scary so they act out.

If you see these behaviours, take the time to connect with your child. Spend one-on-one time with them and address the fact that they likely have been feeling sad/angry/lonely/scared. When we can validate those emotions and provide a context, our children learn from that and instead of unhealthy emotional patterns, we help build emotionally healthy children.

Acknowledge a longer timeline for processing

Children take longer to process events and thus when you think you may have moved on or at least gotten beyond the worst of it, know that's likely not the case for your child. Children can sit on a topic for a couple months before finding the words and time to talk about it, and this can be far more common when adults are also grieving and children don't necessarily feel like their questions are welcome.

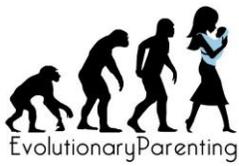
One way to help with this is to set up regular check-in times with your kids after an event to allow them time to discuss anything that has come to mind recently about what happened. If they faced a loss, asking them every couple weeks about it tells them it's okay to talk to you about it and it's okay to have big feelings a while later. Similarly, remember that because they are processing for longer, you may see some of those acting out behaviours come up later on in the grieving process.

Feel with them

Adults have a weird habit of feeling like we need to somehow show our kids mastery of our emotions instead of being honest about them. This means we hide our negative emotions entirely until we possibly lose it and our kids see us act like toddlers having a tantrum. Yet showing our emotions in a healthy way and sharing the grief with our kids is one way to help them connect with us and learn from our own emotion regulation skills.

At the simplest level, just telling children we feel the same can have a massive impact on their acceptance of these emotions. Often our kids feel overwhelmed and scared by their own grief; they don't realize that this is actually a normal feeling when something terrible has happened. By feeling with them, we help normalize these emotions - no matter how big - and our children can then become more comfortable in seeing how we cope and learning that they too can cope.

At the more complex level, when we feel with our kids we can help activate the synchrony that exists between most parents and children. Learning isn't just a conscious event and as our kids connect emotionally with us, their bodies can learn from how we regulate as their physiological reactions start to mimic ours, learning some basics of emotion regulation skills in the process. Of course, what they learn will depend on our own reactions and emotional skills which is why it's important to work on those for ourselves as well.



Remain in control

This is perhaps the most important of all of the elements and this is not about control as in obedience, but emotional control. When our children grieve, they may lose control, and often we feel we have to reign them in. Instead of doing that, we need to show them that they can lose it and we will still be here keeping the world-at-large safe for them. We need to be doing this whenever they get upset, but it is even more important when children face grief.

If we think about the process of grief, children have lost something important to them. For them, the entire world has just been turned upsidedown and they have been shaken completely. On top of the sadness that they are bound to feel, they will also feel great fear for they don't know what is coming. In many ways, the concept of 'forever' is lost on them and so even thinking about it is scary and confusing. In this fear and confusion, they will look for security because that's what children do, and if you are unable to be that person who has some emotional control, then they will become even more fearful and experience even more stress.

Importantly here, being emotionally in control is not the same as being emotionally void. As mentioned above, sharing our own emotional states and how we are coping is a form of modeling that is ideally suited to emotional development. We can empathize with our children while still retaining control. Being sad is not the same as losing control which is really about asking our kids to have more control because we fear their emotions.

Grieving is one of the hardest emotional states we will find ourselves in. It's even harder for our children. Remember to take the time to be with them and try to take their perspective when you can for this will be the best possible way to help them cope with tragedy.

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