



DEMPSEY™ CENTER

Supporting Grieving Children and Teens

Experiencing a death can be confusing and overwhelming for people at any age. Here are a few guidelines to help you support a child or teen as they grieve:

Your child (and his or her grief) is unique

Just as adults, every child is an individual and processes grief differently. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve and children may show their grief in unexpected ways. Many children will act out their feelings physically or behaviorally. Try to be patient and mindful of any changes in your child’s behavior or mood and respond with empathy and positive role modeling.

Be honest and concrete in talking about the death.

Children are often confused by the euphemisms adults use to explain death. Even though it may feel uncomfortable to use concrete language, your child will feel comforted by your honesty and will do better with information that they can understand. Adolescents and young adults will have a better grasp on the abstract concepts related to death, but will likely still appreciate direct communication.

Tip: Use words like: “death,” “dying”, “dead” instead of “passing-on.”

Let them take the lead in deciding what they are exposed to.

For example: do they want to attend the funeral? Is there something they would like to say or do to memorialize their loved one? Providing explanations about what they can expect and then allowing them to decide their level of involvement will help them to feel empowered and less vulnerable. Be aware that children may change their mind at the last minute.

Talk about the person that died.

Remembering can be a very important part of the healing process. Talking about memories of the person who died can give the child permission to share feelings and sends the message that death and grieving are okay topics to talk about.

Tip: Children often like to have a physical token to help them remember, such as an article of clothing of their deceased loved one or a shell from a special beach they liked to visit together.

Understanding Death

Children develop a complete understanding of death over time. Generally by age 8-12 they are able to comprehend the important concepts below but still need information explained and concepts reinforced.

Irreversibility: A person cannot come back to life after they have died. Most children under 8 will have difficulty grasp this concept and may ask repeatedly where the deceased person is and when they will be back.

Tip: To help explain this, draw upon previous exposures to death, such as a relative, pet or other living creature that had died.

Non-functionality: After a person dies, their body no longer works. It cannot eat, drink or feel things.

Tip: Certain spiritual beliefs can confuse this concept, be clear to differentiate between the physical body and our beliefs regarding the soul.

Causality: A body stops working for a specific reason. Like a machine, if something breaks it prevents the body from working and then the body dies. Be aware of “magical thinking” in younger children. They may think that they somehow caused the death need to be reassured that this is not the case.

Universality: Every living thing dies. This is how life is supposed to work. We are born, we live, and then we die. Plants, animals, and bugs are all living things that will also die. A natural question that will arise is “are you going to die?” Answer this question as honestly as you can and do not make any promises you cannot keep. “No one can promise that they won’t die, but I am not planning on dying anytime soon.” Another common concern children have which sometimes is not spoken, is who would take care of them if you were to die.

Spirituality: Many people believe that humans and other living things have souls that exist regardless of whether their body is alive. Although comforting, these concepts are abstract and often not fully comprehended until early adolescence.

Tip: to avoid confusion, reinforce the previous concepts first. Explain that there are many different ideas about what happens when someone one dies and no one knows what happens for sure. Then introduce what your family believes happens.

No matter where your child is in their grieving process, there are different resources to assist you in supporting them. A Healing Tree Youth and Family Counselor is available to help and can give you information to help you with your specific concerns.

For More Information or support, please contact the Healing Tree Program at the Dempsey Center: 887-336-7287 or visit www.dempseycenter.org