

GOOD GRIEF

***Exploring Feelings, Loss
and Death***

By Barbara Ward and Associates

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS SUFFERING FROM LOSS

- DO let your genuine concern and caring show.
- DO be available... to listen or to help with whatever else seems needed at the time.
- DO say you are sorry about what happened and about their pain.
- DO allow them to express as much unhappiness as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share.
- DO encourage them to be patient with themselves, not to expect too much of themselves and not to impose any “shoulds” on themselves.
- DO allow them to talk about their loss as much and as often as they want to.
- DO talk about the special, endearing qualities of what they’ve lost.
- DO reassure them that they did everything that they could.

- DON’T let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out.
- DON’T avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided by friends adds pain to an already painful experience).
- DON’T say how you know how they feel. (Unless you’ve experienced their loss yourself you probably don’t know how they feel).
- DON’T say “you ought to be feeling better by now” or anything else which implies a judgement about their feelings.
- DON’T tell them what they should feel or do.
- DON’T change the subject when they mention their loss.
- DON’T avoid mentioning their loss out of fear of reminding them of their pain (they haven’t forgotten it).
- DON’T try to find something positive (e.g. a moral lesson, closer family ties, etc.) about the loss.
- DON’T point out at least they have their other.....
- DON’T say they can always have another.....
- DON’T suggest that they should be grateful for their.....
- DON’T make any comments which in any way suggest that their loss was their fault (there will be enough feelings of doubt and guilt without any help from their friends).

IDEAS FOR PARENTS ON HOW TO HELP CHILDREN WITH THEIR GRIEF

“A child can live through anything so long as he or she is told the truth and is allowed to share with loved ones the natural feelings people have when they are suffering.”

Eda Le Shan

General ideas

- 1) The first thing to communicate to a child is “You are not alone; I am with you”.
- 2) Share feelings with children. They want and need information and participation in the grief process. (Often parents wish to protect children from reality seeing it as a time of innocence.)
- 3) Let children know that feelings take precedence – stop cooking, reading the paper, etc.
- 4) Make sure children get the clear message that the death was not their fault. It was not because they were bad in any way or because they were unlovable. Neither was there anything they could have done or still do to alter the situation.
- 5) Do not tell the child “Don’t worry” or “Don’t be sad” etc. As with parental grief, they are unable to control their responses. Also avoid messages that tell the child what he/she should or should not be feeling. Do not criticise or seem shocked by statements and feelings.
- 6) Encourage the child to accept strong feelings explaining that recovery to creative healthy living involves pain. Unfortunately there is no short cut.
- 7) Be honest about the deceased and show that they were loved for themselves alone with all their strengths and weaknesses. Let children know their value has not changed, that they are loved and special.
- 8) Do not deny your pain. It is all right to cry in front of your child.
- 9) The child may speak of feeling the presence of the dead person. Do not dismiss this lightly because some children, like some adults, do have these experiences.
- 10) Do not say the dead child “fell asleep and did not wake up”.
- 11) Do not say “we lost our child” as children will fear becoming lost while out shopping etc.
- 12) Take care of your marriage. It is easy to neglect other members of the family at times of loss.
- 13) Parent-teacher co-operation should be sought. Teachers underestimate the time that a child will be disorganised. It usually lasts beyond the first anniversary of the death.
- 14) Do not worry about ‘regression’. Allow it until equilibrium and energies are renewed. The child usually emerges stronger and more competent. If the regressive behaviour causes problems away from home only, explaining your reasons for this request.
- 15) To increase confidence, encourage the child in all his/her abilities.

Practical ideas

- 1) Many children will respond to physical comfort. Suggestions are:
 - a) Give special foods. Soft foods can be reassuring and are a reminder of earlier, easier times.
 - b) Children respond to snuggling against a warm, soft rough surface. So let them sleep between flannelette sheets or have a blanket on top of them.
 - c) Extra clothes in the daytime help to reduce the coldness of shock and instils a feeling of being lovingly wrapped and protected against possible harm.
- 2) If difficulty in settling to sleep for relaxation, allow a radio or tape to play softly.
- 3) For fear of the dark, use a night light.
- 4) Children need physical play. Try not to cut this time down even if the child is getting behind with his school work due to lack of concentration. Seek teacher participation.
- 5) Grief is tiring so alternate a child's passive and active occupations. Arrange a quiet time in the afternoon and plan an early bedtime.
- 6) If they are having difficulty in following directions, make lists out. These can be done in the form of pictures for the very young.
- 7) A special outing, treat, present or new colourful clothes can bring comfort and help to create a feeling of security.
- 8) If the child is over-eating, serve the food on individual plates. You could say "I wonder if you are really hungry, let's try a cuddle instead".
- 9) Offer small nourishing meals to those who lose interest in eating.
- 10) For both over-eating and under-eating, teach the child to cook.

SUGGESTIONS TO HELP CHILDREN EXPRESS THEIR GRIEF

It is unwise to react to angry outbursts and aggressive behaviour with coaxing, punishments or threats of punishment. Children often need help to verbalise their feelings. Like many adults, they can feel uncomfortable about this. Following are some ideas to help children to express their grief.

- 1) Tell a child that talking does not have to be so hard as five feelings that we all have are: being sad, mad, glad/happy, scared and lonely. Go through the list asking them what feelings they have. The body signals for “any sad feelings” can be nodding, shaking of head, or shrugging of the shoulders. Shrugging can mean “I do not want to talk about this”.
- 2) Ask the child to indicate with his hands how much feeling they are experiencing.
- 3) Have drawings of faces depicting feelings. Ask the child to point to the one he is experiencing.
- 4) Have cards with a drawing showing all the feelings. Get the child to pick a card and tell a story about that feeling or just talk about the feeling.
or
Have several cards the same, divide them out and place one at a time in a pile in the centre of the table. When two of the same come together, ask the child to talk about the card.
- 5) Tell a story and pause when a description of a feeling is due. Ask the child what feeling they think is appropriate or get them to point at suitable drawings depicting emotions.
- 6) The best way to deal with the physical release of anger is to respect the energy zone and devise a permitted expression for feelings. For example, “When you have that hitting feeling, you may not hit Tom but you may hit your pillow or bang your fists on the table” or “What you are doing is not safe for you. I want you to take care of yourself”. This approach avoids the conflict that will occur if the child is told “Don’t do that”. Suggested material to have on hand to use as a means for release of anger are – newsprint, clay, reinforced cardboard blocks, foam bats, punching bags, inflated clowns, jointed play people and animals, hammer and nails.
- 7) Aggressive behaviour: Talk to the child about the outcome of their actions and give them the freedom to choose how to deal with it. This overcomes the feelings of helplessness and gives them the feeling of being in control.
- 8) When the child seems to be losing control, support him by saying, “It’s getting hard for you to stop. I want you to sit down or go to your room to cool off”. If there is an argument with another child, the situation can be diffused by saying, “How can we solve this fairly?”
- 9) Always try to plan substitute behaviour.