

Helping Teens and Children Grieve

The Scarsdale community tragically lost the Steinberg family in a plane crash in Costa Rica on New Year's Eve. No matter one's relationship to the family, we all experience the universal feelings that accompany this type of tragedy: grief, fear, and vulnerability. This type of loss is difficult to comprehend, especially for children and teens. With that in mind, SFCS has compiled this guide on how to talk with children and teens about loss. The attached document contains common grief reactions seen in children and teens.

1. Take Care of Yourself

It is vital that you attend to your emotional and physical needs. This will enable you to be more present and available for your child. Even if you didn't really know the person who died, you can find yourself overwhelmed, thinking about what it would be like if someone close to you experienced a tragic loss. Try to eat nourishing food, sleep, move your body as you're able and reach out to friends and family and talk about how you're affected.

2. Answer the questions they ask. Even the hard ones.

Kids learn by asking questions. When they ask questions about a death, it's usually a sign that they're curious about something they don't understand. As an adult, a couple of the most important things you can do for children is to let them know that all questions are okay to ask, and to answer questions truthfully. Be sensitive to their age and the language they use. No child wants to hear a clinical, adult-sounding answer to their question, but they don't want to be lied to either. Often the hardest time to be direct is right after a death. When a young child asks what happened, use concrete words such as "died" or "killed" instead of vague terms like "passed away." A young child who hears his mother say, "Dad passed away" or, "I lost my husband," may be expecting that his father will return or simply needs to be found.

3. Give the child choices whenever possible.

Children appreciate having choices as much as adults do. They have opinions, and feel valued when allowed to choose. And they don't like to be left out. For example, it is a meaningful and important experience for children to have the opportunity to say goodbye to the person who died in a way that feels right to them. They can be included in the selection of a casket, clothing, flowers and the service itself. Some children may also want to speak or write something to be included in the service, or participate in some other way.

After a death, having choices allows children to grieve a death in the way that is right for them. Sometimes children in the same family will choose differently. For

example, one child may want pictures and memorabilia of the person who died, while another may feel uncomfortable with too many reminders around. If you are a parent, ask your child what feels right to them. Don't assume that what holds true for one child will be the same for another.

4. Talk about and remember the person who died.

Remembering the person who died is part of the healing process. One way to remember is simply to talk about the person who died. It's okay to use his/her name and to share what you remember. You might say, "Your dad really liked this song," or "Your mom was the best pie maker I know."

Bringing up the name of the person who died is one way to give the child permission to share his or her feelings about the deceased. It reminds the child that it is not "taboo" to talk about the deceased. Sharing a memory has a similar effect. It also reminds the child that the person who died will continue to "live on" and impact the lives of those left behind.

5. Respect differences in grieving styles.

Children often grieve differently from their parents and siblings. Some children want to talk about the death, while others want to be left alone. Some like to stay busy and others withdraw from all activities and stay home. Younger children may be clingy, whereas teens may prefer to spend time on their own or with peers. Recognizing and respecting that each child grieves in his or her own way is essential to the healing process for a family. Listen to children talk about their feelings and watch their behavior, and you will help clarify and affirm these natural differences.

6. Listen without judgement.

One of the most helpful and healing things we can do for a child is to listen to his or her experiences without jumping into judge, evaluate or fix. Well-meaning adults often try to comfort a child with phrases such as, "I know just how you feel," or, worse, advice such as "get over it" or "move on." While our intentions to soothe a grieving child are correct, using such responses negate the child's own experiences and feelings. If a child says, "I miss my Dad who died," simply reflect back what you've heard, using their words, so they know that they're being listened to. Use open-ended questions such as "What's that been like?" or "How is that?"; children are more likely to share their feelings without pressure to respond in a certain way. This is just one way we can validate their experiences and emotions, helping them regain a sense of safety, balance and control.

7. Allow for saying goodbye.

Allowing children and teens to say goodbye to the person who died is important in beginning the grieving process. A service enables children and teens to see how valued and important the person was to others and know that grieving the loss is

okay. Before the service, let children know what is going to happen, who will be there, where and when it takes place and why it's important. Children who are prepared with this information are able to make the choice about attending the funeral. Should they choose not to participate, invite them to create their own commemorative ritual or activity for saying goodbye—planting a flower or tree, holding a candle-lighting ceremony.

8. *Be aware that many children will have an increased sense of fear about their safety.*

Understandably. So will many adults. While we can't guarantee to our children that nothing bad will ever happen to them, we can provide assurance that these events are relatively rare, and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Children may have many questions about the events, particularly about natural disasters. Answer their questions with language that fits their developmental stage. It's okay if you don't know the answer to a question. If it's a question that might have an answer, offer to look up more information. You can also ask children what they think the answer is as they often have thoughts and ideas they want to share with you.

9. *Take a break.*

Children grieve in cycles. For example, they may be more inclined to play and divert their focus from the death when the death is recent and parents are grieving intensely. More than adults, children need time to take a break from grief. It is important to know that it's okay to take a break. Having fun or laughing is not disrespectful to the person who died; this is a vital part of grieving, too.

10. *Grief is ongoing.*

Grief never ends, but it does change in character and intensity. Many griever have compared their grieving to the constantly shifting tides of the ocean; ranging from calm, low tides to raging high tides that change with the seasons and the years.

If you or someone you love is in need of additional support, or if you have additional questions or thoughts relating to this guide, please call Scarsdale Edgemont Family Counseling Service at 914-723-3281.

Information is provided by the Dougy Center.

Visit their website at www.dougy.com