

When it comes to children and grief, listening is often the best medicine.



A Grieving Child

Though we all wish it weren't so, children experience many losses that can cause them grief. Some of the most common losses are a cherished pet, a move to a new city and school or a best friend moving away. But the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent or other close loved one can be devastating to a child and bring grief and many difficult questions. These moments represent opportunities to teach children about grief and loss. Helping a child learn healthy and meaningful ways to deal with loss and express grief can provide important life lessons and preparation for adulthood.

But how do you talk with a child that has suffered a great loss? What is appropriate to explain and how long should a child grieve? The answers are less complicated than you may imagine. It all begins with simply listening and observing.

The Idaho Quality of Life Coalition

We are a coalition of healthcare professionals, private citizens and businesses working together to provide information and education on hospice, palliative care and advance planning. We advocate for compassionate care at the end of life. Our mission is *to work collaboratively with our partners in providing education, tools and resources to promote quality of life through Advance Planning, Hospice and Palliative Care.*

The Idaho Quality of Life Coalition is frequently recognized for its statewide leadership. We were the recipient of the 2010 "Sojourns Award" - a \$50,000 award granted by the Cambia Health Foundation. We hope you will join us by becoming a member and lending your voice to our mission and efforts.

To Learn More

www.IDQOL.org

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Children and Grief

A Guide to Mending Hearts



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Education and Excellence in Hospice and Palliative Care

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The Truth Is Best

Children respond best when they are told the truth. This builds trust and avoids misunderstanding. Answer their questions honestly in a caring, reassuring way. Avoid phrases that relate death to sleep. Be honest. Say, "the person died" rather than something suggesting that the person "just went to sleep." References to "sleep" can create problems with sleeping, especially in younger children. For the very young, hearing that the person "can't talk anymore, walk anymore, or smile" or that "their heart isn't beating anymore" is easier to understand. It's important to realize that each child will grieve in his or her unique way.

A Balanced Approach

Children strive to maintain balance and equilibrium. They seek those things that are familiar. Structure helps with stability and security. That's why, following a significant loss, many children wish to return to school where the routine is known and familiar. Try to maintain consistent patterns—bedtime stories, foods, activities, rules in the family, etc. These patterns will reinforce a sense of balance and normalcy.

A child can live with anything as 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 LeShan
Writer, Playwright

Allow Them to Be Involved

Children also appreciate being involved, in a way that is appropriate for their age, in funeral and memorial services because it gives them a sense of control in a situation where they had no control. A three year old could be asked, "What was Grandma's favorite color?" When she says, "pink," you can respond with, "then we can have pink flowers because Grandma would like that." An older child might want to give input on what to include in the service or where to hold it. A teenager could offer to write and read a poem or share a memory about the loved one. Involvement, according to research, helps with grief both now and later in life.

When children are included, they know that their feelings are respected, and they are not as isolated. By allowing a child to make choices and participate, you give them a greater sense of control and help them stabilize after a loss.

Keep Them Active

Children often prefer activities over talking when dealing with grief. When a death occurs, anger, frustration, guilt, sadness, fear and anxiety can be overwhelming, but physical activity can help them manage their pain. Rituals that celebrate the loved one can also be created. Children are good at creating meaningful ways to remember the individual and express grief. Sharing stories about the loved one, for example, is a helpful way to mourn.

Reach Out to Others for Help

There are many resources available to help children deal with death, dying, grief and loss, including camps where children learn to cope with grief. Coalition member hospices are a valuable resource in identifying options for grief support. To learn more and to find a hospice in your area, visit our website: www.IDQOL.org.