Helping Children Cope after Loss

By Kathleen A. Platzman, Ph.D.

Losing loved ones is unfortunately, part of life. Just as we want to help and support our children through the normal and expectable challenges of growing up, we are also called upon to help them through times of grief. This difficult process is often made even more complicated and challenging when the adults are grieving too. It’s often hard to know what to do.

Relationships make a child feel secure. During difficult times, everyone needs a strong sense of security and belonging. First and foremost, children need to feel close to those who care for and protect them. Just spending time with each other often promotes feelings of comfort and belonging. This is especially true during times of sadness. At these times, children may need to be told that they are still safe, secure, loved, cared for and protected, even though one of their caretakers is gone. In that way, they know they are still connected to those who love them, even if one of the relationships has ended.

Expressing concerns and feelings make a child feel secure. Encouraging a child to express strong, overwhelming, or complex feelings is also important after personal loss. Of course younger children usually do not fully grasp the meaning of a loved one’s death. They do, however, key in on the emotional climate at home, and the upset and sadness of family and friends. They might want to know why so-and-so is so mad or sad. They might assume that their loved one is only gone for a short period of time. School-aged children might understand a bit more. They might ask questions about who is responsible for their loved one’s death or what happens after death. Adolescents understand even more, and might have questions and comments about the broad meaning
of death in terms of spirituality, morality, fairness etc. Regardless of age, talking about these potentially overwhelming feelings helps the child cope and move on.

Keeping feelings bottled up inside does not help them go away, or promote understanding. Often, when children cannot find outlets for their feelings, they go through periods of troublesome behavior, such as poor schoolwork, fatigue, withdrawal, or changes in routine. Sometimes children express feelings nonverbally as with drawings or playing out a scene over and over again. Another way is just naming feelings of sadness or upset. Acknowledging these feelings is reassuring to children. It helps them feel they are not “off base” or alone with overwhelming emotions.

Taking an action can make a child feel better. All of us like to feel part of things, or part of the solution to a problem. Adults sometimes bring flowers and food to grieving people. They might also make monetary contributions to various causes that had meaning for their deceased loved one. Even small gestures of reaching out toward others can make a child feel better after someone dies. These kinds of gestures can take different forms. Being part of memorial services, picking a bunch of flowers, doing chores at home, or drawing pictures are all small actions that can bring comfort to others and start the process of recovery after a sad loss.

Recovery takes time. The long road back to “normal” after a loved-one’s death takes time. Children do have amazing powers of recovery. Just allowing time to be with a child, allowing and supporting the expression of feelings, and helping the child take actions toward recovery are all potentially helpful.

If you, your child, or someone you know is experiencing a difficult time getting over a loved-one’s death, you may wish to contact your local mental health center or call
your doctor for a referral. The Georgia Psychological Association also has a referral line (404-351-9555) where you can get recommendations for professionals who often deal with children who experienced loss.

For further information regarding this article please contact the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory West Campus, 1256 Briarcliff Road N.E., Suite 323-West, Atlanta GA, 30306. You can email us at msacd@listserv.cc.emory.edu, visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD, or phone us at 404-712-9800.

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