



by Karen Stephens

## Help for Children Coping With Death: Resources Within Your Reach

Comforting herself months after her uncle died, three-year-old Katie occasionally tells her mother, “Uncle Tim lives in the clouds now.” Her mother didn’t tell her this. In fact she doesn’t know where Katie heard it, but it’s an image that seems to reassure Katie that all is well with Uncle Tim.

While playing in the sandbox, preschooler Tony tells a playmate, “My Grandma is in heaven talking to her friends until I come up with her.” A sentence or two later the conversation takes an equally quick turn to another topic.

Both of these children have successfully coped with family death. They’ve accepted their loss and they’ve moved on to the nuts and bolts of living the energetic life of a preschooler. They have memories of loved ones lost, but they think of them only occasionally. Loss and sorrow no longer command center stage.

Katie and Tony passed through grief, learning in the process that sadness doesn’t last forever, not even when someone very special dies. Going full-speed ahead, they reaffirm their investment in the present. They don’t feel guilty enjoying life or the gift of those who remain. And that’s just as it should be.

The path to accepting death, and moving on, is not the same for all children. However, typical symptoms of childhood grief have been identified. They include: poor attention span, change in appetite and sleep patterns, regression to babyish behaviors, atypical aggressiveness or withdrawal, separation anxiety, bed-wetting, and stress-related illness such as headaches and stomachaches.

Usually children’s grief can be handled within the family circle. Open, on-going communication, re-establishing predictable routines for meals, play, school, and sleep and lots of good old tender, loving care help children regain emotional balance and stability.

Katie and Tony mastered their grief with relative ease. But some children aren’t so fortunate. Their symptoms of grief are more intense, extreme, pervasive, and persistent. Kids are especially vulnerable to incapacitating grief when death is shrouded in unusual or sensational circumstances, such as family suicide, homicide, or AIDS.

The side-effects of such death can be unrelenting for children. But death closely tied to a new birth, re-marriage, or divorce can also be shattering. When children struggle with severe, prolonged symptoms of grief, it impairs their emotional stability, family harmony, friendships, and learning performance.

It should be no surprise that some child benefit from, and indeed need, professional help when coping with death. When children become overwhelmed, they often don’t verbally ask for help. More typically, their behavior does the talking for them.

### **Behaviors That Signal Children Need Extra Help with Grieving**

The following behaviors indicate children need help from outside the family circle: denial of death, refusal to discuss feelings, suicide threats, self-mutilation, prolonged

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and continual dependency, physical or verbal abusiveness to animals or people, use of drugs or alcohol, dramatic change in grades or work habits, sleeplessness or excessive sleep, over or under-eating, isolation from friends, extreme separation anxiety, and excessive clinging.

### **Professionals Who Can Help**

Turn to any of the following professions for helpful guidance: Funeral service director, clergy, hospice director, mental health professional, Child Life Specialist in a children's hospital, psychologist, social worker, pediatrician or nurse, school counselor, teacher, or child care professional.

### **Local Support Groups**

Review your telephone directory's yellow pages to locate grief support groups in your area. They may be sponsored by hospitals, cancer clinics, funeral homes, or chapters of the support group called The Compassionate Friends.

### **Resource Books for Parents Helping Children With Death and Grieving**

- *Talking About Death: A dialogue between parent and child* by Earl A. Grollman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
- *Helping Children Grieve, A parent's guide* by Helen Fitzgerald (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
- *Helping Children Grieve When Someone They Love Dies* by Theresa Huntley (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991).
- *Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children* by Linda Goldman (Bristol, PA: Accelerated Development, 1994).
- *Good Grief: Helping Groups of Children When a Friend Dies* by Sandra Sutherland Fox (Hartford, CT: New England Association for the Education of Young Children, 1988).

### **Books about Death for Children to Age 8:**

#### **Factual:**

- *About Dying* by S. B. Stein (New York: Walker and Company, 1974).
- *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death* by B. Mellonie and R. Ingpen (New York: Bantam Books, 1983).
- *When Someone Dies* by Sharon Greenlee (Atlanta: Peachtree Press, 1992).
- *The Saddest Time* by Norma Simon (Chicago: Albert Whitman 1991).

#### **Fiction**

- *Bye Mis' Lela* by Dorothy Carter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
- *Grandpa Loved* by Josephine Nobisso (Westhampton Beach, NY: Gingerbread House, 2000).
- *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* by Tomie de Paola (New York: Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1978).
- *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch (Willowdale, Canada: A Firefly Book, 1983).
- *My Grandpa Died Today* by Joan Fassler (Springfield, IL: Human Sciences Press, 1983).

### **Books about Death for Children Age 8 and Older:**

#### **Factual:**

- *When Something Terrible Happens: Children can learn to cope with grief* by Marge Heegaard (Minneapolis, MN: Woodland Press, 1991).
- *Coping with Death and Grief* by Marge Eaton Heegaard (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications, 1990).
- *When Someone Very Special Dies* by Marge Eaton Heegaard (Minneapolis, MN: Woodland Press, 1988).
- *How It Feels When A Parent Dies* by Jill Krementz (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992).
- *Losing Someone You Love: When a Brother or Sister Dies* by Elizabeth Richter (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1986).

#### **Fiction:**

- *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993).
- *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White (New York: Harper and Row, 1952).
- *The Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1987).
- *Taste of Blackberries* by Doris Smith (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1988).
- *The Man Who Loved Clowns* by June Rae Wood (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1992).

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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