



by Karen Stephens

A Time to Mourn: Helping Children Cope With Family Death

It's not hard to believe that children grieve differently than adults. Their response to death is affected by their age, limited experiences, and ability to comprehend events. It's especially influenced by the strength of their emotional tie to the deceased person. Children's reactions may range from mild curiosity to an astonishing sense of loss.

Circumstances surrounding death also affect children's grief. Traumatic, sudden death causes more disorientation and shock than prolonged illness. But whether death is expected or not, stress and a sense of loss is the fall-out children must learn to endure and eventually overcome.

After mourning death, accepting it, and then adjusting to life anew, children come through the experience psychologically stronger and more mature. But of course, there's a down side. After confronting death, children's rose-colored view of the world will forever be a bit less rosy — a necessary loss of childhood.

As children struggle to make sense of life and death, they may question life's fairness and life's meaning. Throughout the process, they'll need adults to emotionally support them and to wisely guide them. If we do our job well, children will face the world with a clearer grasp of reality. They'll develop a stronger sense of family, a deeper appreciation for their place on earth, and a greater reverence for life. I hope the following information makes your job easier.

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Children don't mourn the same as adults. Because children don't fully comprehend the finality of life, they don't usually go into prolonged periods of grief. They'll go in and out of grieving, sometimes over weeks or even years.
Tip: Eventually children will talk about death, but don't pressure them. Be prepared to answer questions whenever and wherever. This could happen during sand box play, at the grocers, or in your house of worship. Follow children's cues. Use teachable moments to respond to children when they are ready.

To move through grief, kids must express feelings. They may feel shock, disbelief, confusion, denial, panic, insecurity, betrayal, abandonment, loneliness, rejection, anger, frustration, and guilt. These are all normal, predictable feelings we experience when losing a loved one. These feelings can send children reeling on a roller-coaster of extremes.

Tip: Be accepting of any and all feelings. Respond with empathy, even when shocked by children's frankness or the depth of their anger. "I understand . . ." are two of the most comforting words kids can hear. They let children know they aren't alone in their pain. Most importantly, these words acknowledge that the anger children may feel is okay.

Children express feelings in a variety of ways. Don't expect all kids to grieve in the same way, not even children from the same family. Some kids will cry, throw tantrums, withdraw, or ask questions non-stop; others won't.

Tip: Experiment with various forms of expression to help children sort out feelings. Writing an essay helped Sarah, an almost 12 year old from Brigham School, cope with the aftermath of her grandfather's death. By putting her

experience to paper, Sarah eloquently tells us how to help kids. "...There is a part of you missing when someone you know dies. You have to have someone to comfort you. You need someone to talk to about it. Someone you can always go to. You can't get it out of your mind. The memories are always there. Sometimes, even years after someone has died, you still need to cry when the memories get too hard to handle it."

Is your child too young to write? Then play make believe with puppets. If your child develops a story around death, follow the lead. But don't coax or pressure children into acting out death feelings; children often clam up when they feel prodded.

Some children sort out death issues through pretend play with dress up clothes or dollhouse people. Others may prefer to paint or draw pictures of how they feel. Young children can dictate stories to you or they can record them on tape. Even scribblers can write out their feelings. Sometimes a simple, "Tell me about your story," will encourage them to open up. Librarians can recommend children's stories with lead characters dealing with death. Fictional characters might give voice to your child's worries and concerns.

Children need to say good-bye. Coming to terms with death means children must accept its finality; they have to admit their loss. Passage through grief is facilitated when children have a chance to say goodbye.

But today, children are often robbed of goodbyes. Death usually takes place behind closed doors, out of children's sight, beyond their reach. It occurs at night in a dark bedroom, in the hospital, or in a nursing home.

Sudden death is the sneakiest of thieves. It slips away, taking away forever the chance for a child to lend a comforting hand, to share a whispered "I love you," to hug a fond farewell.

Tip: If literal goodbyes aren't possible, children can benefit from offering symbolic farewells. Goodbyes don't have to take place exclusively at a funeral service or a burial site. In fact, more familiar and less threatening locations may be better. Goodbyes can take place at a park's scenic view, from a lakeshore, or even by a back yard fountain or in a garden. The setting doesn't matter as much as the expression of sentiment.

Some children write letters of goodbye to be tucked in the pocket of the loved one. Some read a favorite story out loud. Others draw pictures or pick a flower to be placed with the deceased. It's up to each family, each child, to find an authentic way of saying good-bye.

Children need to commemorate loved ones. It's a fine line we parents walk. We want children to get over their grief; we desperately want to stop their hurting. But at the same time, we want children never to forget. We want them to forever cherish memories of loved ones. Eventually children pass through grief and are able to focus on the love they received.

Tip: The process of letting go of grudges, of graciously accepting loss, can be moved along with simple, symbolic gestures. Some children maintain memories by creating photo albums to revisit from time to time. Others maintain a scrap book or a keepsake box of sentimental tokens of affection.

A reader shared a poignant family ritual to keep her father's memory alive. At his grave site service, each grandchild released a balloon with a note attached to it. Notes recalled a favorite grandpa memory. Now, each Christmas, the children commemorate grandpa by releasing balloons in his honor. The children say they're sending balloons up to grandfather in heaven. (Can kids get any sweeter than that?!)

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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