

THE COUNSELOR

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WHEN CHILDREN GRIEVE

What do you say to a ten year-old girl whose mother just died of cancer, or a teenage boy who loses a friend in a car accident? Everyday we face death and loss. The longer we live the more likely we will be touched by the loss of a loved one. Loss comes in many forms at different times in our lives. Death can come suddenly or after a lingering illness. Catastrophic losses of life occur through natural disasters (tornadoes, hurricanes, etc.) and man made disasters (shootings, car accidents, etc.). Grief is a human response to change and loss. It is also one's own personal experience of loss. When these changes or losses are major, the response can feel overwhelming. Many of life's changes that don't result in death still evoke the grieving process. Loss of a job, a relocation, physical injury, divorce, or the birth of a child, bring changes that impact one's world. What happens when children and adolescents lose someone special? How do they cope with death? How do they grieve? What can we do as parents, educators, counselors, pastors, and friends, to help these youngsters and their families deal with grief and loss? This newsletter addresses these questions.

The Grief Process

No two people grieve exactly the same. Many factors affect the grieving process. A child's reaction to loss depends heavily on the nature of the death, the history and type of relationship he had with the deceased. The child's developmental stage at the time of the loss, his support system, prior losses, emotional stability, and their family's reaction to grief, all impact a child's adjustment to loss. Children react differently than adults when a family member dies. Most child experts agree that there is little or no understanding of death before age two. The three to five year-old preschool child does not usually recognize that death is final. He perceives that life is somehow diminished, that the person is living far away. Anxiety at this age is primarily due to separation rather than the finality of death. Between ages five and



nine children see death as a separate person, like a skeleton, ghost, etc. They also know that death is final. The ten year old usually recognizes death as final and inevitable. All children are affected by death. Contrary to several myths, children do grieve, they grieve all losses in spurts, several times a day. They also re-grieve throughout all developmental stages. Oftentimes they don't know they're grieving or understand their feelings. One in seven children loses a parent to death before age ten. Additionally, a child will go through six developmental stages between birth and age twenty-one, where each stage is marked by continuous change in cognition, feelings, and development. Most of these changes are controlled by circumstances outside of the influence of the child. Most children in grief pass through four major emotions: fear, anger, guilt, and sadness. Common reactions and phases for children in grief are:

Shock: the child may not believe the death really happened and act accordingly. The thought of death is too overwhelming.

Physical Symptoms: the child may have a variety of complaints such as headaches, stomach aches and fears of dying.

Anger: the child may become angry at the person who died for leaving them alone. They may also be angry that God did not make them well.

Guilt: the child may think that they caused the death by being angry in the past with the deceased. They may also feel responsible for not being better.

Anxiety and Fear: the child may wonder who will take care of them and they fear that others who love them will die. The child may cling to others he loves.

Regression: the child may revert to behaviors he or she had previously outgrown, such as bed wetting or thumb sucking.

Sadness: the child may show a decrease in activity like being too quiet.

Acceptance: the child does not "get over it" but learns to live with the loss.

Children will oftentimes generalize from the specific to the general. For example, a child may be afraid to go to sleep if someone they know died in their sleep. They are also repetitive in their grief, asking the same question over and over. Their grief is physical too. Children express themselves with their bodies (their behavior). They display excessive movement. Children grieve as part of a family. The whole family functioning is affected when a member dies. All the relationships within the family may shift, adjusting to the change in the family structure. Families who do not allow a healthy sense of release in their grief are prone to problems. Families will go through a variety of emotions (shock, denial, anger, guilt, fear, exhaustion, depression, confusion) before they regroup and accept the loss. The family will never be the same though. Expect a roller coaster effect with considerable flux and turmoil as each individual and their family goes through the grieving process. The child's past relationship with the deceased determines the magnitude of his loss. A deceased grandparent, for example, may have had a deeper bonding, care taking relationship, than the parent, thus the child grieves the grandparent more heavily.

Adolescent grief features both adult and childhood grief. Adult grief usually consists of conflicted emotions of guilt, anger, powerlessness, withdrawal, and isolation. Adolescents, sensitive to issues of autonomy and competence, are more likely to feel and resent being overprotected than are

children. They will exhibit many of the adult and children reactions to grief but their volatility emotionally and physically, places them at risk for more serious acting out, especially when their grief is complicated (as in a traumatic loss). They are prone to depression, thoughts of suicide, aggression, substance abuse, and sexual acting out.

Some danger signals to watch for in children:

- An extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities.
- Inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone.
- Acting much younger for an extended period.
- Excessively imitating the dead person; repeated statements of wanting to join them.
- Withdrawal from friends.
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school.

These warning signs indicate that professional help may be needed. A professional can help the child or adolescent accept the death and assist the survivors in helping the child through the mourning process.

Our Response

How should we respond to the grieving child? Most people try to take away the child's pain. All losses need to be grieved in some way. There are no shortcuts, we all have to move through it. We are there to listen, cry with them, and comfort them in their sorrow. We can pray for them and with them. Recommendations for helping children work through the grief process are listed below:

- Be open, direct, simple, honest, and gentle in describing the death.
- Be available, listen carefully to their questions.
- They will need your affection and security now more than ever.
- Offer only details that children can absorb. Don't overload.
- Answer only questions the child asks.
- Let them express what they feel. They may feel angry at God.
- Don't tell the child how he should feel or should not feel.
- Allow the child to make some decisions about participating in family rituals, i.e., visitation at the funeral, socializing after the funeral. Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.



- Visit the graveside.
- Offer them pictures and possessions of the deceased.
- Have family powwows on a weekly basis or more often.
- Feel free to express your own grief. Don't hide your feelings of grief.
- Let your child see you cry. They need to know that crying is a natural response.
- Check with each child to see if he or she is feeling guilt.
- Offer reassurance.
- Encourage expression of grief through activity, drawing, etc.
- Do not rush them to grieve.
- Offer warmth, with your physical presence and affection.
- Share your feelings with your child. Allow the child to comfort you.
- Be patient. Children need to hear the story and will ask repetitive questions.
- Reassure the child that they or their loved ones will not die soon.
- Maintain order, stability, and security in the child's life.
- Listen to what the child is telling you. Then respond according to the child's needs.
- Talk to them in a language they can understand.
- Be loving, accepting, truthful, and consistent.

Comfort for Those Who Mourn

We all have to come to grips with death, but it really hurts to see a child lose a loved one. Their whole sense of security is shaken by such a loss. Children are particularly vulnerable to loss when it involves a significant caretaker. We should be sensitive to the impact death has on them and not be quick to assume that they will bounce back. Our culture doesn't handle death well. No one, especially children should be expected

to get over or snap out of it. Death rips right at the heart. There is no prescription for fixing a broken heart. We can help comfort, reassure, come along side and love them. We can prepare them for inevitable loss by capitalizing on the subject when it presents via loss of a pet, a friend, etc. As Christians we can talk about death in light of the temporary separation from loved ones and the eternal life guaranteed us. God is the only true hope and comfort. He knows the pain. Pray for those who grieve. I pray that those reading this newsletter will be helped to reach out to those who mourn. Death is the most difficult part of life. It brings pain, separation, and a longing to be with our loved ones. We face the heart-break of living the rest of our lives without that person. Eventually we will all face our own death. We are aware of our own helplessness, our inability to control the inevitable outcome, our own finality. We are utterly dependent on the Giver of Life - God. He brings our meaning, He is our meaning, even in the end. He knows our sorrow, He knows our pain. Rely on Him to help you move through the grieving process. He promises comfort. He says so in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:4); "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

F.Y.I.

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SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

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**12/5/99 - Out of Darkness & Gloom
Second Baptist Church**

**2/13/00 - The Valley and the Door of Hope
Second Baptist Church**

**3/3/00 - TX Assoc. of Community
Colleges State Convention -
Speaking On: School Violence**

**4/2/00 - Loving Discipline
Second Baptist Church**