

Helpful things to say and not so helpful things to say to grieving children

Not helpful

The story	The sentence	Why it's not helpful
<p>When Thabo returned to Cape Town after the funeral of his father a neighbour said to him: "You must forget about your father now".</p> <p>This made Thabo feel very bad. He loved his father even though it hurt and was actually scared of forgetting him. Thabo felt as long as he could remember him they were still connected.</p>	<p>You must forget about your mother now.</p>	<p>The child actually fears forgetting the person. The pain is still one form of connection and is very precious.</p>
<p>When she was 9 Neliswa's mother died of AIDS. At the funeral of her mother Neliswa was told that she must look after her father now. She felt very scared by that, because she felt very small and wanted to someone to protect her and hold her, not having to look after someone else.</p>	<p>You must look after your mother. You are now the man in the house and responsible.</p>	<p>Puts a lot of pressure on the child.</p>
<p>Nomsa's brother had died a year ago. She missed playing with him and laughing with him. Since he died, coming home was no fun. Her parents were always arguing and seemed very sad too.</p> <p>A teacher told her off for being sad all the time, saying she should be over it by now. Nomsa felt like cutting the sad part out of her.</p>	<p>Are you still sad about that? Are you still grieving?</p>	<p>Make the child feel it is not allowed to not be sad.</p>
<p>Marlies had been really sad about her dad dying three weeks ago and often cried herself to sleep. One day she was playing with her friend in the room and her friend made her laugh. Her mother came in and told her off for laughing instead of being sad, as she should be.</p> <p>Marlies felt very unsure of herself because many times she was sad her mother didn't see it and did not comfort her. And now she had a brief happy moment. It felt like it was just for show and that her real feelings didn't matter at all.</p>	<p>You obviously have forgotten your father already. You are laughing again.</p>	<p>Children can well experience and live both pain and joy and move quickly between the two. A sentence like this may make them feel that they are not allowed to be happy.</p>
<p>Liz' father had killed himself and Liz felt very guilty thinking it was her fault because she was not good enough.</p> <p>When a teacher said to her I know just what it feels like, Liz felt very angry because it didn't seem that the teacher had lost a parent because of suicide and so could not really understand what it feels like.</p>	<p>I know just what you feel like. (You can say it, if you had exactly the same type of loss, mother through suicide, father through AIDS)</p>	<p>Don't say you know what it feels like, if you have not had the same type of loss. Losing a friend or a cousin is different to losing a parent or to losing a sibling.</p>
<p>Alice's dad died in hospital after a car crash. One day an aunt came by the house and said what a bad hospital it was.</p> <p>Alice felt guilty because they hadn't given her dad the best.</p>	<p>They didn't look after your dad properly.</p>	<p>Don't say anything bad about the care that the person that has died has received unless you are explicitly told by the person.</p>
<p>When Neliswa returned from the funeral of her mother the teacher just pretended everything was normal.</p> <p>Neliswa felt very hurt by that because her whole world was collapsing and people were ignoring it. She felt that no-one saw her and her pain.</p>	<p>Ignoring it all. Don't avoid the subject all together because you are feeling helpless.</p>	<p>Makes the child feel misunderstood, unappreciated and unloved.</p>



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Helpful

The story	The sentence	Why it is helpful
<p>Neliswa has been very withdrawn after the death of her sister and she seemed often very sad and didn't seem to like playing with her friends anymore.</p> <p>One day she was visiting a friend's house and the mom noticed how withdrawn Neliswa was. She knew that she had lost her sister and just started asking a few questions while cooking. For the first time since long Neliswa started talking. She actually ended up telling some funny stories about her sister and they were laughing together in the kitchen.</p>	<p>Tell me about your sister. What do you remember about her? What is your favourite memory? What was she like?</p>	<p>Gets the child to talk about the person and feels that you are interested.</p>
<p>Jon was often holding his hand in front of his mouth and pursing his lips. Sometimes he was shaking his head.</p> <p>He had a very observant teacher who one day after class took him to the side and said to him: I know that you have lost your mother and that you love her very much. You are allowed to be sad. It is normal. It's fine to cry.</p> <p>Jon just nodded, but inside himself he felt relieved. He had been feeling that he mustn't let anyone see his feelings and tried to hide it.</p>	<p>You are allowed to be sad. It is normal. It's fine to cry.</p>	<p>Gives permission. Makes the child feel understood.</p>
<p>Andrew's dad died of TB. He had been sick for a long time and Andrew had to help him a lot. Still Andrew felt he never did enough because however much he helped, he dad still died. Sometimes Andrew had wished that his dad would not be there because it was so hard to help him all the time. Andrew felt really guilty about that and thought his dad must have known his thought and that is why he died.</p> <p>One day his mum sat him down and told him that she thought his dad must be very proud of him because he helped him so much in the last days before he died, and that his dad was very grateful for that help.</p>	<p>Affirm that they have done everything to help their mother or father.</p>	<p>Children often feel guilty that they were not good enough and that someone died because of them</p>
<p>Melissa was very sad at her brother's death and it was difficult for her to see her parents being sad too. It felt like she had not only lost brother but her mom and dad too. She was scared of talking about her brother to her mom, because it would make her mom cry.</p> <p>Her mum's friend Patience came to the house and invited her to do something special with her. Being together with Patience was so nice and Melissa felt very comfortable because she had her all to herself and started to talk about her brother. It was so nice for her to talk to someone who let her be sad without Melissa having to carry their pain too.</p>	<p>Give the child opportunity to talk about the person who died without the parents being there.</p>	<p>Sometimes it is hard for children to talk to their parents because they are aware of the pain the parent feels and don't want to make it worse.</p>
<p>Neliswa was puzzled about where her mommy was and had got all sorts of answers from people that she couldn't make sense of. She asked her Sunday school teacher where her mommy was and instead of just saying she is in heaven she said: Where do you think she is. Neliswa thought for a moment and then said very quietly: I think she is in my heart.</p> <p>Her Sunday school teacher smiled and said: Yes, I think so too. Neliswa was relieved and you could see a smile that lit up her face.</p>	<p>What do you think happens? Where do you think you mom is now?</p>	<p>Often children have an idea what they believe but need permission to believe it and feel secure with it.</p>
<p>When Zekele came back from the funeral of her mother a girl from her class sat next to her during lunchtime</p> <p>"I remember when my mother died, how very painful it was. It felt like my heart was ripped apart."</p> <p>Zekele felt there was finally someone who understood her and she also felt really connected to that person because they had felt the same pain. It made her feel safe.</p>	<p>'I remember when my mother died, how very painful it was. It felt like my heart was ripped apart.'</p>	<p>Establishes a connection. Only say it if you have really experienced it.</p>

