

Khululeka

Grief Support for Children and Youth

Information on Grief for Carers and Healthcare workers

In your work to support and educate families you probably come across a lot of grieving children and teenagers.

Sometimes when we are confronted with grieving children we feel overwhelmed and helpless. Most of us want to help and want to reduce the pain that the child is feeling. Or we are scared to get too close to the children and remind them of the pain.

So we end up saying things like: you must forget, you must be strong, you must not let this thing make you unhappy.

But this exactly can lead children to feel that their pain has no value.

The child experiences the pain as a way of connecting with the person who has died. Many children are actually afraid that they will forget the person, because then they are really not there any more.

Children who have lost someone in the last year are more likely to get ill as their immune system is weakened.

To help children live well with grief there are a few things you can do as a care worker:

- ❖ When the child comes back from the funeral do not ignore that something very important has happened. Ask them about the funeral and their experience.
- ❖ Talk about grief and death openly with the family and in any groups that you run.
- ❖ Do not pretend to ignore children when they have experienced a loss.
- ❖ Consider some of the physical exercises on our web page that will relieve tension.
- ❖ Get together with colleagues and talk openly about coping with grief.
- ❖ Read up on grief!
- ❖ Order the book "Someone I Love Died" from Khululeka for you and your school. From: khululeka@ipages.co.za, Telephone No: (021) 633-5287, Fax No: (021) 637-3487)
- ❖ Find out if there is a grief support group at the school or nearby. Please get in touch with us to connect you to the nearest facilitator or to attend one of our training courses. Initiate one with a teacher or social worker.

Understanding about children's grief

Children go through different phases and are often confused about that is happening with them. Frequently they feel isolated and end up isolating themselves even more by being angry and rude or withdrawn.

To begin with the child will probably feel shock and numbness, not feel anything at all and not believe what has happened.



They might not sleep at night and wet their beds, act out and be explosive and angry. They might more often be ill, have tummy aches, headaches and rashes and not like to eat their food. The body's immune system is usually weaker at the time of a loss that is why they are more susceptible to viruses and have colds and flu.

They might not be able to concentrate at school and find it hard to do their homework.

They often feel empty inside, sad and tearful and then suddenly seem to be quite happy and normal. These mood swings are natural. They might feel guilty about the death (children often do) thinking they have somehow caused it.

All this is normal.

But look out especially for:

Children that have had a number of losses.

Children that are in families where there has been a death of another child.

Children that don't get out of bed.

Children that have stopped attending school.

Call us to find out if there is anyone near you that we know of that you can refer children to.

What helps:

It helps the children are allowed to freely talk about the person, draw pictures and play games that involve the person.

It helps if there is an adult around that can be a special person to each child so that the child can talk to about the dead person. If you feel you can't do this because you are very upset about the death too then have a look around if there is anyone who can take on that role.

It helps if the children are allowed to go to the funeral and visit the graveyard when they want to.

It helps to allow children to have their own space and to choose who to open up to and who not.

It helps if the children continue to experience the same routine.

It helps if the children are included in the decisions that are made about them.

It helps if the children are allowed to see the dead body. Some children really want to see the dead body and others don't. Trust each child to know the right thing. Sometimes what children imagine in their minds is worse than what they will see. Do prepare the children by describing in advance what they may see.

It helps if you are understanding and listen hard to what the children have to say. If a child gets aggressive and shouts, stay calm.

It helps not to tell the child what to feel.

It helps the child to meet other children that have experienced the same thing.

Don't forget to

Use your life experience of things that have helped before.

Look after yourself and get together with other people, who are experiencing something similar.

