

Kululeka - grief support for children and youth

Understanding children's grief

How Do Children React to the Death of a Loved One?

Children react with sadness and tears to the news. In most cases, the crying subsided or lessened over time, but some still cried daily or weekly after a year had passed. Tears often were triggered by the sight of others crying. Children also became anxious over the safety of other loved ones or themselves. Many children expressed guilt about remembered misbehaviour or missed opportunities to express affection (Worden, 1996). Parents and teachers may observe outbursts of anger and acting-out behaviour among children who have lost a loved one. Somaticization (physical complaints without a disease or physical basis to account for them) increased during the first year after the death of a loved one in some of the children studied (Worden, 1996). The number of children experiencing serious illness during the first year increased but fell to match the percentage of non-bereaved children during the second year. A similar pattern was observed in the number of accidents experienced by bereaved children (Worden, 1996).

A child's response to death is usually emotional, physical and behavioural and these responses differ according to age, personality and how many losses they have experienced.

Typical (natural) responses (at different times) include:

shock, denial, disbelief, numbness – this is typical in the 6-8 week period following the death. They need acceptance and loving care;

- ❖ lack of feelings, not knowing what to think, feel or do;
- ❖ physical changes like tiredness, not sleeping or eating, nervousness, stomach pain, tight throat, head-ache, rashes;
- ❖ regression to a state of dependency, demanding of attention, not able to relate to peers;
- ❖ grown-up roles trying to be the parent in the house;
- ❖ disorganization and panic;
- ❖ explosive emotions; acting-out behaviours;
- ❖ fear of their own death, of other's dying, of being abandoned
- ❖ guilt and self-blame (a belief that it may have happened because of their behaviour)
- ❖ relief particularly after a prolonged illness
- ❖ loss, emptiness, sadness

Children and families affected by HIV and AIDS are often more traumatized by the stigma associated with the disease than the death itself. Children show that they do not exhibit more violent behaviour but more depression, anxiety and post-traumatic disorders. It is much harder to understand this experience when there is a loss of words due to the shame and secrecy around HIV/AIDS.

More information on www.Khululeka.org



Understanding Children's feelings and reactions

Fear and anxiety

The loss of a parent generates a lot of fears and anxieties. Will the other parent also die? Who will pay for my school fees? Will I myself also die? To whom can I go when I'm sick? Will I be separated from my sisters and brothers? Can we stay in this house etc.?

All these fears need to be addressed directly by those attending to the needs of these children. Even if the adults can't give an appropriate answer because it is not yet clear or decided, it seems to be important that children can address these questions:

What children need:

Reassurance that the child is not to blame

Bereaved children may wonder: "Did I cause the death because of my anger or my short-comings?" Children learn early that strong feelings can hurt another person. They may be angry at the person – and then this person dies. Children need to know that they didn't cause the death and that their negative feelings toward the deceased did not contribute to or cause the death.

Careful listening

Children have fears, fantasies, and questions, and they need persons who will listen to them. It is very important not to give children superficial answers, even if to us adults the questions seem strange or even uncomfortable. The listener may be someone other than the parent: group facilitator, teachers, counsellors, relatives, neighbours, or parents of peers.

Validation of individuals' feelings

Feelings must be acknowledged and respected as valid. It is a big temptation to tell a child "how she or he should feel". We can't and we shouldn't stop, for example, the feelings of sadness trying to convince the child that this feeling should now be over, showing that the brother or sister stopped crying. If the feeling is there, it is there. We also have to keep in mind that each child has a distinct personality and each child had a different relationship with the deceased parent.

Help with overwhelming feelings

One cannot protect children from these intense feelings and emotions provoked by the death of a parent. These feelings might be very strong and too scary for the child to express directly. What we can do as adults is to work out with them possibilities of expressing these feelings or to help them to find safer ways of expression.

We have also to be aware that children often cope and communicate through playing activities.

Involvement and inclusion

Children need to feel important and involved before the death as well as afterward. The youngest children in the family, and often also the girls, are frequently those who are treated as the less important and involved. One possibility to address these needs of feeling important is to include children in funeral planning and the funeral itself unless it is not culturally appropriate.

Children, like adults, need rituals, but there are in general few rituals in the society that include children. If you can't include the children, at least explain to them what you do and why.

Continued routine activities

Children need to maintain age appropriate interests and activities. Children worry about who will wash them tomorrow or if they can continue to attend the school.

Opportunities to remember

Children need to be able to remember and to memorialize the lost parent not only after death but continuously as they go through the remaining stages of their life. There are various ways to support children: Pictures and other things belonging to the deceased can be useful reminders, maybe giving the children a piece of cloth which used to belong to the deceased parent. Shared stories in a family can also be very helpful.

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