

UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEF OF CHILDREN



PNW 391
REPRINTED JANUARY 1993
A PACIFIC NORTHWEST EXTENSION PUBLICATION
OREGON • WASHINGTON • IDAHO



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR GRIEVING CHILD?	4
QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE	6
CHILDREN'S BOOKS ON DEATH AND DYING	8

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UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEF OF CHILDREN

It is impossible to shield children from death. Death enters the child's world, sometimes at the very center by taking away a parent, a brother or sister — sometimes even threatening the child's own life. Children also experience painful losses of much-loved relatives, friends, and pets.

Young children are curious about death, but many adults hesitate to discuss it with them. Yet only through such discussion is it possible to know what children understand about death. What they understand will affect their reaction to it.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR GRIEVING CHILD?

Grief includes many feelings, some of the most common being disbelief, numbness, guilt, anger, and intense sadness. Parents may not have the answers or may not even have comforting words to offer a grieving child. However, they can be willing to listen and to answer questions honestly even when the only possible answer is, “I don’t know.”

This publication offers some suggestions to help you discuss death with your children.

YOUR CHILDREN ARE READY TO TALK ABOUT ANYTHING THAT FALLS WITHIN THEIR EXPERIENCE.

Sometimes parents’ own fears about death can prevent them from openly talking to children about their loss. Children may quickly translate such a “conspiracy of silence” to mean that whatever feelings they have about death must be hidden. Poor communication can make children misunderstand what has actually happened. Instead, they may create fantasies that are far more frightening than reality.

USE THE SMALL DEATHS THAT MOST CHILDREN EXPERIENCE TO HELP THEM UNDERSTAND.

For example, when a family pet dies, children can feel that the body is cold. It doesn’t move, and it has no heartbeat. They can plan a funeral and participate in the burial. By sensitively guiding children through such experiences, you not only teach them the facts about death, but also help them develop a healthy attitude toward it.

WHEN YOU DISCUSS DEATH WITH YOUR CHILD, USE THE CHILD’S LANGUAGE TO PROVIDE INFORMATION.

Children operate in a concrete world. They need simple words to explain death. Avoid using

vague expressions such as “he passed away,” “she went to sleep,” or “he went to a better place.” Such expressions can be confusing to the child and may arouse fears. For example, a young boy who was told that his dead grandfather was simply “in a long sleep” suddenly became afraid to fall asleep. Finally the young boy was able explain that “I don’t want to fall asleep like Grandpa did and never come back.”

Preschoolers need help understanding what “dead” means, what caused the death, and what happens to the body. School-aged children generally understand the meaning of death but may need help understanding its cause and circumstances. For example, when someone dies in a car accident, children may wonder exactly what happened to the body to cause the death. A simple explanation may be enough: “When John’s head hit the dashboard, it injured his brain so badly that he died right away.” If children have more questions later, address them sensitively, yet honestly. If you don’t know the answer, guide the child to someone who does.

Remember that children “grow up with the loss.” Often they will ask for more information later in their life.

CHILDREN’S GRIEF RESPONSES MAY NOT BE IMMEDIATE OR OBVIOUS. OFTEN THEIR BEHAVIOR WILL REVEAL THEIR FEELINGS.

Children may use many defenses at the time of death. Consequently, their feelings may be delayed. Because young children often don’t have words to express their feelings, their grief is not always obvious. Consider the words of one child who said, “When my father died I was only four and I didn’t understand a lot about

what happened. I didn't realize I would never see him again. Then when I was in second grade, I was crying. The teacher thought I was sick and she asked me what was the matter. I said 'My Daddy's dead.' "

When children can't express their grief, they may become depressed. Some signs of depression are withdrawal, poor school performance, and changes in eating and sleeping habits.

LISTEN TO YOUR CHILDREN AND WATCH FOR GRIEF-RELATED BEHAVIOR.

The ability to listen and observe are the most basic helping skills. Talk to your child about his or her feelings of grief. Be willing to ask questions, and above all be willing to listen. Your patience and availability encourage children to express their feelings.

Sometimes parents are tempted either to avoid talking about the subject altogether or to talk about it too much. Saying to the child, "This is a very sad time for you. I hope you will talk to me sometime about how you are feeling," may be more helpful than confusing the child with too many words of explanation.

Younger children sometimes need help putting words to their feelings. "You look sad. I think you must be missing your sister very much. Is that right?" Children may not respond, or respond only minimally to the first invitation to talk. Because grief is a process, the invitation must be an open and long-lasting one.

ASSURE YOUR CHILDREN THAT THEY ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE FAMILY.

Profound grief can cause a child to feel separated from friends. Feelings of abandonment

and loneliness are common. Helping classmates and friends find ways to express empathy is one way to surround a grieving child with loving support. In addition, the child needs *the stability of a normal routine*. As much as possible, it is important to minimize the changes in the life of a grieving child. Familiar routines at school and home can offer security to a child whose world is painfully altered. Sensitive yet encouraging statements, such as "you will always miss your sister, but you will be happy again," can help the child face some of the hard times ahead.

ALLOW CHILDREN TO ASK QUESTIONS FREELY.

Once again the emphasis is on listening to children. Their questions are often expressed in behavior, rather than in words. For example, children who display self-punishing behavior such as biting fingers until they bleed or refusing to eat for long periods of time may be asking, "Was this death my fault?" Without careful listening, a parent may miss such an important question; thus, children may be left alone with terrible feelings of guilt. They must be reassured that no one was responsible, and told that nobody knows the reason for many things that happen.

REFLECT UPON YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES WITH DEATH.

It is important to keep your feelings about death separate from those of your child. Knowing how to make this distinction will free you to guide your child through the grieving process. It also enables the child to move through his or her grief without becoming entangled in another person's feelings.

QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE

There are no standard rules to help children understand death and cope with all the emotions that accompany it. You may have many concerns and questions about discussing death with your children. Here are some common questions parents ask:

HOW LONG DOES NORMAL GRIEF LAST? HOW WILL I KNOW IF PROFESSIONAL HELP IS NEEDED?

It is impossible to put a time limit on grief. A common misconception is that grief for adults should be over in a year and children are often expected to recover even earlier. Grief is a difficult and painful process, one that takes far longer to complete than a year. Some people never fully recover from grief, even though they are no longer consumed by it. Grief is a circular journey, one that often brings the griever back to the same place again and again. Normal grief can be thought of as spiraling outward. Even though many of the same feelings come up again and again, there *is* movement toward recovery.

More important than the length of your child's recovery is whether he or she is *expressing feelings of loss*. Remember that the expression of grief takes many forms. The more freedom and opportunities you give your child to express the loss (such as talking about missing the one who died), the more quickly recovery will take place. Also, it is important to keep in mind that childhood grief is intermittent: often the child will appear to feel no grief, then suddenly be longing again for the lost relationship.

A sign of unhealthy grief is *total avoidance*. When a child who is old enough to know that a death has occurred persistently refuses to acknowledge the loss (he or she may even appear

to not recognize the loss), you may want to consider seeking professional help for your child.

SHOULD YOUNG CHILDREN ATTEND A FUNERAL?

Children may feel hurt if they are excluded from the funeral. If children are included in family activities when a death occurs, they are more likely to develop a healthy response to death that will sustain them when a close adult can't be there to comfort them. Explain beforehand what rituals will take place. Talk about how people might respond emotionally. When these things are explained calmly and without fear, children will often choose to attend. The choice, however, should be the child's.

You may feel your own grief prevents you from being responsible for your children at the funeral. In that case, ask a trusted friend or relative to be with them and to take them out if they become uncomfortable or bored. Later, when the acute pain of the death is over, talk with your children about how you were and still are affected by the experience. Sharing your feelings will help children understand how the process of grief unfolds and is resolved.

By helping your child share some type of ritual with friends and family, she or he learns that people can share the death experience with others. Being able to both give and receive emotional support throughout one's life is important. Traditional ceremonial events surrounding a death give a child a chance to ask questions, make comments, and express feelings.

In the case of a parent's death, children as young as three can be taken to *briefly* view the body or be a part of the funeral. If a parent dies when children are very young, they may never

believe that their parent is dead unless they have some memory of the funeral and the body. Some of these children continue to search emotionally for their parent throughout their lives.

SHOULD YOUR CHILD VISIT A DYING RELATIVE OR FRIEND?

You may feel uneasy about allowing children to visit a dying relative or friend because you want to protect them from sadness. Most dying people are cared for in hospitals and nursing homes, and most health professionals are supportive of children's visits to the seriously ill. First, ask the patient if he or she would like to have the children visit. Sometimes a brief visit from a child can be a "breath of fresh air" to a dying person. If your loved one agrees, ask the doctor to write permission for such a visit in the patient's chart. Be firm. You, your children, and the patient all have a right to say goodbye.

Prepare children for what they will see. Before the visit, explain to your children the function of some of the medical equipment and how it helps the dying person be more comfortable. For example, when Grandpa has an oxygen mask and intravenous tube, say, "Grandpa is wearing a green plastic mask over his nose and mouth to help him breathe a little easier. He also has a needle in his arm which is putting medicine into his veins. These things are helping him to feel more comfortable while he is so sick." Hospital staff are

usually willing to cover parts of the equipment if necessary for a more relaxed visit.

WILL QUICKLY REPLACING A PET WHO DIED HELP A CHILD RECOVER FROM THE LOSS?

A child's first personal experience with death is often the death of a pet. Because children form close emotional attachments with pets, the death of a pet can be a tragedy in the life of a child. Helping the child to conduct a funeral ceremony with the burial can have profound meaning for the child. It is an opportunity to express feelings. Parents may suggest such a ceremony or participate at the child's suggestion.

Resist the desire to quickly replace the pet in hopes of sparing the child pain. It is a natural and valuable experience for children to grieve the loss of a life that was dear. Ask yourself, "Am I allowing my child the opportunity to grow from this experience?" Replacing a pet immediately may discourage expressions of grief. It also suggests that pets (or other living things) can be easily and painlessly replaced. The child needs time to adjust to the loss. Only by grieving the loss of the dead pet will the child be able to reinvest love in a new one. Six months is a reasonable time for most children to adjust to the loss; for some, however, it may be shorter or longer. Consider the intensity of the attachment when deciding how long to wait for another pet.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS ON DEATH AND DYING

Although the following bibliography is divided into three age spans (Ages 3 to 6; 6 to 9; 9 to 11), consider the specific needs of the individual child. Children at either end of an age bracket may enjoy books from the previous or next group. Also, children and parents may find emotional release and comfort through the simple poetic language and illustrations of younger children's books. These books address losses of various significant relationships, including parents, grandparents, siblings, other relatives, friends, and pets.

AGES 3 TO 6

□ *Bartoli, J. (1975). **Nonna**. Illustrated by Joan Drescher. New York: Harvey House.*

This story shows the continuance of everyday family life despite grandmother's death. Although everyone misses grandmother, her spirit is kept alive through the family members' affectionate memories. Baking grandmother's special Christmas cookies helps ease everyone's sadness.

□ *Brandenberg, A. (1979). **The Two of Them**. West Caldwell, NJ: Greenwillow Books.*

A loving grandfather creates objects, songs, and stories for his granddaughter. When he is confined to a wheelchair, the child takes care of him. After his death she hurts "inside and out."

□ *Brown, M. (1958). **The Dead Bird**. Illustrated by Remy Charlip. New York: Young Scott Books.*

Four young children find a dead bird and decide to give it a funeral. They visit the dead bird's grave for several days but gradually forget

him. This book handles death in a caring but not overly intense manner.

□ *DePaola, T. (1973). **Nana Upstairs and Downstairs**. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.*

Four-year-old Tommy's bedridden grandmother dies. Tommy's mother urges him to keep her alive in his memories. A falling star is interpreted as a kiss from Nana Upstairs. Years later, Tommy recalls the star and thinks of his Nana Downstairs.

□ *Donahue, M. (1988). **The Grandpa Tree**. Roberts Rinehart, Inc.*

Beautifully illustrated tale of the lifecycle of a tree. The story covers the life of the tree, from the time a seed is dropped by a bird, grows, and finally turns to sawdust, makes a home for new trees, and becomes a seed again.

□ *Jordan, M. (1989). **Losing Uncle Tim**. Niles, IL: Albert Whitman.*

When his beloved Uncle Tim dies of AIDS, Daniel struggles to find reassurance and understanding and learns that his favorite grown-up has left him a legacy of joy and courage.

□ *Sanford, D. (1989). **David Has AIDS**. Portland, OR: Multnomah.*

A little boy with AIDS turns to God to help him cope with the pain, fear, and loneliness that surround him.

□ *Stiles, N. (1984). **I'll Miss You Mr. Hooper**. Illustrated by Joe Mathieu. New York: Random House.*

The Sesame Street family helps Big Bird handle his emotions when he forgets that Mr.

Hooper has died. Includes helpful notes to parents.

□ *Thomas, J. (1988). **Saying Good-bye to Grandma.** New York: Clarion Books.*

When her Grandma dies, 7-year-old Suzie goes back with her parents to visit the small town where her Mother grew up to attend Grandma's funeral.

□ *Varley, S. (1984). **Badger's Parting Gifts.** New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.*

Wise old Badger's sole regret about dying is the grief his friends will feel. Badger's death is portrayed in a dream state as a "walk down a long tunnel." The memory of Badger lives on as his friends recall the countless ways Badger has enriched their lives.

□ *Zolotow, C. (1974). **My Grandson Lew.** Pictures by William Pene Du Bois. New York: Harper & Row.*

Lew and his mother share their memories of grandfather who died several years before. This book portrays the keen memories young children often have for the significant people in their lives.

AGES 6 TO 9

□ *Alexander, S. (1983). **Nadia the Willful.** Illustrated by Lloyd Bloom. New York: Pantheon.*

Nadia refuses to lose the memories of her beloved older brother after his disappearance in the desert. She helps her village embrace his death and treasure their memories of him.

□ *Aliki. (1979). **The Two of Them.** West Caldwell NJ: Greenwillow Books.*

This book describes the love between a child and her grandfather. Throughout her childhood years, grandfather helped and cherished her. As he becomes increasingly bedridden, the child cares for him. After his death, she reflects on the life/death cycle while sitting in their orchard.

□ *Anderson, L. (1979). **It's O.K. to Cry.** Illustrated by Richard Wahl. Elgin IL: The Child's World.*

Two young brothers deal with their grief at the death of their favorite uncle who is killed in a motorcycle accident. The book is accompanied by a study guide.

□ *Bunting, E. (1982). **The Happy Funeral.** Illustrated by Vo-Dinh Mai. New York: Harper & Row.*

Laura, a Chinese-American girl, assists her family in preparation for grandfather's funeral. Blends funeral practices from both Asian and Christian cultures. Includes many customs which would be appropriate for children of any culture.

□ *Buscaglia, L. (1982). **The Fall of Freddie the Leaf.** Thorofare NJ: Charles B. Slack.*

This allegorical tale relates the phenomena of life and death through the experiences of Freddie the leaf and his wise friend Daniel.

□ *Carrick, C. (1976). **The Accident.** New York: Seabury Press.*

Young Christopher has indirectly caused the death of his dog. His parents help him understand his guilt and anger and gradually ease him through the grief process.

□ *Coutant, H. (1974). **First Snow.** Pictures by Vo-Dinh Mai. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.*

Lien, a 6-year-old Vietnamese-American child, learns about death and life from her dying grandmother. Grandmother tells her to search for the meaning of death by going out to the garden and holding her hands to Heaven. In doing so, a delicate snowflake falls to the ground and waters a small green shoot, illustrating the eternal life-death cycle.

□ *Hurd, E. (1980). **The Black Dog Who Went into the Woods.** New York: Harper & Row.*

Seven-year-old Benjamin announces that "Black Dog has gone away to die." That night each family member dreams of Black Dog.

Conveys the deep sense of loss an entire family can feel after the death of a family pet.

□ *Miles, M. (1971). **Annie and the Old One.** Illustrated by Peter Parnall. Boston: Little Brown & Co.*

Story of a little Navajo girl who is given a weaving stick by her grandmother. Annie's grandmother is old and predicts that she will die. Grandmother helps Annie resume the weaving by explaining the cycle of life and death.

□ *Peavy, L. (1981). **Allison's Grandfather.** New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.*

Erica's first encounter with death is through the death of her friend's grandfather. A peaceful death bed scene is described. A gentle philosophy of "light and love" that transcends death.

□ *Viorst, J. (1971). **The Tenth Good Thing About Barney.** Illustrated by Erik Blegrad. New York: Antheneum.*

A boy is heartbroken by the death of his cat, Barney. His parents help him plan a funeral and encourage him to remember "ten good things about Barney."

AGES 9 TO 11

□ *Adler, C. (1990). **Ghost Brother.** New York: Clarion Books.*

Wishing to be like his older brother, who's dead but often materializes to give Wally advice and support, Wally enters a skateboarding competition and finally gains the confidence to be himself.

□ *Cleaver, V. (1988). **Belle Pruitt.** New York: Lippincott.*

When her adored baby brother suddenly dies of pneumonia, 11-year-old Belle is left to cope with the devastating effects on her family.

□ *Coerr, E. (1977). **Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes.** New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.*

Eleven-year-old Sadako is dying of leukemia. This story portrays Sadako's hope for eventual health and her final acceptance of death. Story revolves around the Japanese legend that one thousand folded paper cranes will restore health.

□ *Fairless, C. (1980). **Hambone.** New York: Tundra Books.*

Ten-year-old Jeremy's painful adjustment to the death of his pet pig mirrors the same feelings of grief, loneliness, and anger over his mother's desertion.

□ *Jones, P. (1981). **Holding Together.** New York: Bradbury Press.*

Fourth grader Vickie and her fifth grade sister gradually begin to cope with mom's frequent illness, her hospitalization, and her eventual death. In the process the girls begin to rely on their father and each other. Emphasis is on family communication, unity, and "life goes on" despite the tragedy.

□ *Jones, R. (1981). **Angie and Me.** New York: MacMillan.*

Eleven-year-old Jenna begins to accept her chronic disability through the wise counsel of a terminally ill friend. Emphasizes the importance of life and independence to seriously ill children.

□ *Jukes, M. (1985). **Blackberries in the Dark.** Pictures by Thomas B. Allen. New York: Alfred A Knopf.*

This story revolves around 9-year-old Austin's first visit back to his grandparents' farm after his grandfather's death. Grandmother and grandchild cope with their grief by sharing activities that grandfather loved.

□ *Lee, V. (1972). **The Magic Moth.** Illustrated by Richard Cuffari. New York: Seabury Press.*

Mary Ann, age 10, is dying of an incurable heart disease. The story depicts the confusion and sadness her family feels as her death approaches.

□ *McLendon, G. (1982). **My Brother Joey Died.** New York: Julian Messner.*

A young girl seems unable to grieve the death of a younger brother by Reye's syndrome. The girl and her family learn to cope through professional counseling.

□ *Osborne, M. (1982). **Run, Run as Fast as You Can.** New York: Dial Press.*

Eleven-year-old Hallie is "kept in the dark" about her younger brother's impending death—a fact she intuitively knows. Shows difficulty of Hallie's grieving due to parental secretiveness.

□ *Simon, N. (1979). **We Remember Philip.** Pictures by Ruth Sanders. Niles, IL: Albert Whitman.*

Sam and his classmates help their teacher grieve for the death of his son. Included are many positive ways of helping a friend mourn such as listening, encouraging the bereaved to cry, planting living memorials.

□ *Smith, D. (1973). **A Taste of Blackberries.** New York: Thomas Crowell.*

This story depicts the emotions and memories of an 11-year-old boy whose best friend

dies of a bee sting. Especially notable is the realistic treatment of a child's mourning, guilt, and ultimate acceptance that life can and must continue even after a great loss.

□ *Wallace-Brodeur, R. (1980). **The Kenton Year.** New York: Atheneum.*

Nine-year-old Mandy learns to deal with the accidental death of her father and with her mother's new romance. Throughout the grief cycle, Mandy develops new strengths and new kinds of happiness.

□ *Wallace-Brodeur, R. (1981). **One April Vacation.** New York: Atheneum.*

Because of a superstition, 9-year-old Kate believes she has just 1 week to live. She discusses her fear of death with a spritely elderly aunt who advises her to live her last week to its fullest.

□ *White, E. (1952). **Charlotte's Web.** Pictures by Garth Williams. New York: Harper & Row.*

An animal fantasy about the special relationship between Charlotte the spider and Wilbur, the pig. Charlotte helps Wilbur see that despite her death, she will live on in Wilbur's memories.

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Published and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, by the Oregon State University Extension Service, O.E. Smith, director; Washington State University Cooperative Extension, Larry G. James, interim director; the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System, LeRoy D. Luft, director; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating.

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