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CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND GRIEF – Illness and Death

Although we can know grief as a universal human process with similarities for people of any age, children and teens understand and express their grief in ways unique to their temperament and age. As they grow, children and teens are continually developing skills and awareness that help them assimilate and integrate an understanding of their losses. This process is cyclic and repetitive, continuing throughout life, hence it is not unusual for an older child who has had an early loss to grieve anew with each developmental gain.

Early Childhood - Ages 0 through 5

The grief of young children often goes unrecognized because of their capacities to live in the moment, play easily and touch emotions quickly – characteristics adults do not usually associate with grief. We must come to view their grief in light of their developmental strengths and limitations: their rich imaginations and their limited verbal abilities.

Young children use their imagination and other nonverbal resources to understand their loss. They are very concrete. They grieve through their play, their artistic expression, their physical movements, and their behaviors. Their imaginations help them wonder about the changes in their lives, struggle with the permanency and causes of death, and pretend the wishes they have will come true. Their limited verbal abilities cause them to ask questions about the loss repeatedly and communicate their vulnerability through clinging, unwarranted fears, and tantrums. They may try to communicate feelings through bodily complaints such as “I’m not hungry or “my tummy hurts.” We may not always understand these manifestations of their grief, but it is important we respect our lack of understanding and have faith in the child’s capacity to heal in his/her own way. Children of this age are helped greatly by simple reassurances that re-establish trust in their world: routines, structures and limit setting, familiar people and places, moments of joy, stories and books, closeness to people they care about, careful explanations about what has changed and what has not, and kindness.

Ages 6 -9

Developmentally, children in middle childhood have increased verbal and reasoning abilities, more social awareness, and more knowledge and experience of the world by which to understand their losses. Children express feelings through behavior but their increased verbal and reasoning skills allow them to articulate their feeling and thoughts more clearly, comprehend the causes and permanency of death, and ask more sophisticated questions. Their developing social skills allow them to reach out more significantly to trusted adults and peers, but also create an awareness of their difference from others, and the effect their questions and fears have on others. Magical thinking is common at this age. They may somehow feel responsible for the illness or death because of thoughts, actions, or wishes they may have had. At this age, the capacity for guilt is developing. Cause and effect is forming; there is some understanding of serious illness and death so this may result in fears and worries.

Though older, children of this age still seek reassurance in order to regain balance in their now chaotic world. They may revert to younger behaviors, have increased aggression, seek closeness to caregivers, have many fears, and yearn for routine and familiarity. It is most important that children this age be given honest information about the loss and the changes that are happening in every aspect of their lives. It is a time when trusted adults outside the family can help tremendously by answering questions a child may have. People at school or family friends may have the needed energy to listen, answer questions, and speak openly with children, which can be a source of support for families. Since children of this age do not like to appear different from their peers, joining a peer support group or reading books about loss can offer the reassurance that they are not alone.

Ages 9-12

Independence is developing as relationships with peers increase. Questions such as “will we have to move?” or “what will we do for vacation this year?” can be of concern. Life is seen in a black and white manner. It is most important that children this age be given honest information about the loss and the changes that are happening in every aspect of their lives. This age often separate right from wrong, and illness or death may be viewed as a punishment. Worries and anxieties may go unrecognized as pseudo-adult like behavior is displayed by the child. There is a tendency to intellectualize and act as if it doesn’t matter. A fear of abandonment keeps them on this cognitive level, so support and availability by supportive adults is necessary. Help them regain balance through routine and structure. Trusted adults from outside the family can help support children and peer support groups can offer reassurance they are not alone and reduce feelings of difference and isolation. Physical complaints, tendency or fearfulness, denial, or anxiety are common responses.

Adolescence – Ages 13 – Young Adulthood

Adolescence is a time of startling growth and change, which each young person brings to his/her grief process. Their physical, emotional and cognitive abilities resemble those of an adult, yet they are still young people that maintain many of the aspects of childhood. Adolescents have the ability to comprehend the permanence and enormity of present and past losses and to think toward the future without the loved one. At the same time, they benefit from reassurance, familiarity and honest communication like younger children. To experience a loss in adolescence is particularly difficult because all the developmental tasks, such as the need to be independent, to forge a life outside the family, to experience rites of passage such as driving and working are all challenged by the vulnerability, the emotional dependence, and the chaos that loss brings. It is not uncommon for teens to question their religious beliefs as they grapple with feelings of anger, sadness and worry.

A major challenge in adolescence for caring adults is how and when to offer support. Because their peer group is so central, they may need to seek support there rather than in the circle of the family. Adults often have to simply be there and wait for opportunities to nurture and be part of a teen’s world. A non-judgmental adult outside of the family who can tolerate hearing the questions and concerns of the adolescent can be of great help to them.

It is particularly meaningful for teens with their developed talents and awareness to plan and participate in rituals and ceremonies at a time of loss. It gives them an opportunity to grieve with their peers, and to be reassured that each unique life (including their own) has great meaning. At this age, it is especially important for adults to understand how volatile a time this is for any teen and to accept that sometimes teens may need to delay their grief for a more stable time.

Sources: Helen McGlauffin and Pathways Center for Grief and Loss

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