



Kinship Link

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Pro Kinship for Kids

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Helping Children Deal with Loss and Grief

Most young children are aware of death, even if they don't understand it. Death is a common theme in cartoons, video games, and television, and some of your child's friends may have already lost a loved one. But experiencing grief firsthand is a different and often confusing process for kids. As a parent, you can't protect a child from the pain of loss, but you can help him feel safe. By allowing and encouraging them to express their feelings, you can help them build healthy coping skills that will serve them well in the future.

Kids Grieve Differently
After losing a loved one, a child may go from crying one minute to playing the next. Their changeable moods does not mean that they aren't sad or that they have finished grieving, children cope differently than adults, and playing can be a defense mechanism to prevent a child from becoming overwhelmed. It is also normal to feel depressed, guilty, anxious, or angry at the person who has died, or at someone else

entirely.

Encourage a Child Grieving to Express Feelings

It's good for kids to express whatever emotions they are feeling. There are many good children's books about death, and reading these books together can be a great way to start a conversation with your child. Since many children aren't able to express their emotions through words, other helpful outlets include drawing pictures, building a scrapbook, looking at photo albums, or telling stories.

Be Developmentally Appropriate

It is hard to know how a child will react to death, or even if he can grasp the concept. Don't volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. Instead, try to answer their questions. Very young children often don't realize that death is permanent, and they may think that a dead loved one will come

back if they do their chores and eat their vegetables. Do your best to answer honestly and clearly. It's okay if you can't answer everything, being available to your child is what matters.

Be Direct

Kids are extremely literal, and hearing that a loved one "went to sleep" can be scary. Besides making your child afraid of bedtime for they will think they will die too, it is hard for them to not take what is said directly as the truth. When discussing death, state the facts for it will help your children develop healthy coping skills that they will need in the future.

Attending the Funeral

Whether or not to attend the funeral is a personal decision that depends entirely on you and your child. Funerals can be helpful for providing closure, but some children simply aren't ready for such an intense experience. Never force a child to attend a funeral. If your child wants to go, make sure that you

Helping Children Deal with Loss and Grief continued

prepare them for what they will see. Explain that funerals are very sad occasions, and some people will probably be crying. If there will be a casket you should prepare them for that, too. Keep in mind that even the best-prepared child might get upset, and his behavior can be unpredictable. Kids will not behave in a way that you might want or expect. If you decide that a funeral is not the best way, there are other ways to have a goodbye. Planting a tree, sharing stories, or releasing balloons can all be good alternatives for providing closure to a child.

Discussing an Afterlife

The idea of an afterlife can be very helpful to a grieving child. If you have religious beliefs about the afterlife, now is the time to share them. But even if you aren't religious you can still comfort your child with the concept that a person continues to live on in the hearts and minds of others. You can also build a scrapbook or plant something that represents the person you have lost.

Don't Ignore Your Own Grief

Children will often imitate the grieving behavior of their parents. It is important to show your emotions as it reassures children that feeling sad or upset is okay. However, reacting explosively or uncontrollably teaches your child unhealthy ways of dealing with grief.

Stick to Routines

Children find great comfort in routines, so if you need some time alone, try to find relatives or friends who can help keep your child's life as normal as possible. Although it is important to grieve over the death of a loved one, it is also important for your child to understand that life does go on.

For many children the death of a pet will be their first exposure to death. The bonds that children build with their pets are very strong, and the death of a family pet can be intensely upsetting. Don't minimize its importance, or immediately replace the dead pet

with a new animal. Instead, give your child time to grieve for their dog or cat. This is an opportunity to teach your child about death and how to deal with grieving in a healthy and emotionally supportive way.

The death of a grandparent is also a common experience for young children, and it may bring up many questions, such as, "Will my mom be next?" It is important to tell your child that you will probably live for a long time.

After the death of a parent, children will naturally worry about the death of the remaining parent or other caretakers. Reassure a child that he is loved and will always be cared for. It is a good idea to rely on family members during this time to help provide additional nurturing and care. Therapy provides another outlet for talking when a child may feel like they can't talk with other family members, because they are grieving as well.



Get into a Wellness State of Mind

The way you think about your health and wellness plays a role in the actions you take toward living a healthier lifestyle. If you prioritize your health, you'll develop a wellness state of mind. This means you'll think first about making the healthiest choice when it comes to food and physical activity for yourself and your family.

Before you begin to make changes in your lifestyle, knowing where you are in your journey toward total body health and wellness is important. Here

are some questions to ask yourself in assessing where you are at currently:

- **Why do I want to make changes now? What is my goal?**
- **How ready am I to make this change? If you can quantify your readiness by rating yourself on a scale from 1 (not ready at all) to 5 (very ready) this is very helpful.**
- **Am I willing to try new, healthier foods?**
- **Do I want to get more**

active or change my physical activity?

- **Do I understand that change is a gradual process that takes time, patience, and daily action?**

Your answers to these questions will tell you if you're ready to change your lifestyle and create lasting changes. If so, you're in the right state of mind to power forward or not. Your new wellness mindset will help you become more focused on and conscious of your choices.