

HELPING CHILDREN GRIEVE

by Kelly Baltzell M.A. &
Karin Baltzell Ph.D.



Children grieve much longer than adults - sometimes even for years. A death is an important life event. Each family member should have every opportunity to participate in all aspects of the grieving process regardless of their age. Many adults do not possess insight or knowledge of how to handle the subject of death and grief with children. As adults, it is important that we learn how to help a child who is grieving.



"HELPING CHILDREN GRIEVE"

by Kelly Baltzell M.A. & Karin Baltzell Ph.D.

1. **Talk about the death:** Do not be afraid to talk about death with children. Kids are smart. They will realize things have changed. Be honest concerning your feelings with the children as well.
2. **Model behavior of grief:** Children learn many things by mimicking behavior around them. Grieving in front of children will help them learn they can cry, laugh and be themselves when they are sad.
3. **Going to the final ceremony:** Explain what will happen at the ceremony. Answer children's questions the best you can - it will help their curiosity and their emotions.
4. **Realize the age and stage of death perception:** Grieving for children is different at each age-stage from infants onwards. Be aware of the age - stage and communicate with the child at that stage level. (see ages and stages pamphlet)
5. **Talk to teachers in person:** Make an appointment to talk to a child's teacher directly about the death in the family. Set up a plan of action in case grades start to fail, if behavior starts to change and/or emotional outbreaks occur in the classroom.
6. **Provide an element of safety and reassurance:** Maintain routines as much as possible. Show affection and assurance that the child is loved and will not be abandoned. If the child has lost a parent, talk about who will be taking care of them and the family. A good way to reassure a child is through lots of touching.
7. **Let them feel:** Do not tell a child how they should or should not feel about the death. Children perceive death and accept it in different ways at different ages. Encourage them to talk and share their feelings. Accept them and their responses unconditionally. You need to be as stable as possible so that children can express a great range of emotion.
8. **Reassure children that they aren't going to die:** They did not cause the death and are not responsible for it by their behavior or thoughts. Emphasize to them that this particular death does not mean that they or someone else they love will die soon.
9. **Color and draw:** Give children an outlet to express their emotions. Drawing can help put emotions to paper. Make sure there are plenty of crayons, colored pencils and plain paper available at all times. Encourage them to draw. Have them make up stories about their picture. Do not censure or correct what they say, even though the facts may be incorrect.
10. **Read stories about death:** Buy a book that explains death to children. There are a few books such as "I had a friend named Peter" by Janice Cohn, D.S.W. Read the book with the child and answer any questions. Do not forget the public library. Check to find books to read to children about death and loss or ask the librarian to recommend books.
11. **See A Therapist:** Children are subject to depression just like adults. However, their symptoms can be different. Angry, mad, sad feelings are normal for them to feel. If a child's behavior changes radically be sure to take them to a therapist that specializes in dealing with children and grief. Do not wait to "see how it goes". Make an appointment right away.
12. **Use exact terms:** Use the words die and death. Do not use "passing", go to sleep, lost; tell exactly how it happened! "The heart stopped beating" or the person had cancer of the liver. Otherwise children may think they caused the death or that a bad spirit did.