

Handouts of Teaching Grief Work as an Aide to Life by Kate Roden Dreffin

Kate's Recommended Resource Books:

Talking about Death, A Dialogue between Parent and Child, by Earl A. Grollman

Lifetimes, by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

When Children Grieve by J. James, R. Friedman, and Dr. Leslie Landon Matthews

Ghost Wings by Barbara M. Joosse

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst (pet death)

Catalog Resource:

Rainbow Connection offers the "Rainbow Collection" and "Compassion Books"
477 Hannah Branch Rd. Burnsville, N.C. 28714

Seek out books and other resources that will help you come to grips with your own feelings about death and dying.

Children's Understanding of Death by Age:

Newborn to age three:

Child will sense that something has happened to family.

Child will realize that people are crying and sad.

Child will realize there is much activity in their house.

DO NOT SAY THAT THE DEAD PERSON IS SLEEPING OR JUST WENT AWAY.

Watch for a change in eating or sleeping patterns and irritability.

Be sensitive to child's need, try to maintain consistency in routines, and maintain consistency with significant people in child's life.

Age Three to Six:

Child does not have concept of the finality of death. Child believes that the person will return and will continually ask when the person will return.

Child has belief in "magical thinking." Child may feel responsible for the death.

Child may believe that everyone else he loves will die. Reassure by using "I believe" statements. "I believe I will watch you grow up." "I believe I will come back home from this trip to get hugs and kisses from you."

(3-6 y/o cont'd.)

DO NOT SAY THAT THE DEAD PERSON IS SLEEPING OR JUST WENT AWAY.

Watch for changes in behavior patterns at home, with friends and at school.

Watch for changes in sleeping and eating habits.

Emphasize to the child that he/she was not responsible for the death.

Reinforce that when people are sad, they cry. Crying is a normal, natural, and healthy grief response. (Be a role model)

Encourage the child to draw pictures of his/her feelings and to talk about the feelings.

Make a memory book or plant a tree or garden.

Age Six to Nine:

Child is beginning to understand the finality of death.

Child will seek out detailed explanations for the death. Be sure to explain fatal illness or cause of death from “just being sick.”

Child will be afraid that other significant people may die as well. See reassurance statements above.

Child may be uncomfortable in expressing feelings. May act silly or embarrassed when talking about death.

Talk with the child about normal grief response feelings like anger, sadness, and guilt.

Talk with the child about your feelings about death. Do not be afraid to show your emotions (role model grief work.) This will give permission to the child to express grief.

Make a memory book or plant a tree or garden.

Age Nine to Twelve:

Child is aware of the finality of death.

Child is concerned with practical matters regarding her/his lifestyle.

Child may wish to know all the details surrounding the death.

Child may try to “act like the adult” but then show regression to an earlier stage.

Set aside time to talk with child about her/his feelings and yours as well. Encourage sharing of memories to facilitate grief response.

Assist child in seeking a “hands on” way to preserve the memory of the one who died.

Lots of experiences in life create “loss” or grief responses. Listed below are situations and suggestions to deal with the grief work a child needs to process.

Divorce:

For the young child, time is still a difficult concept. Days or a week or two can seem like an eternity to them. Encourage parents who are sharing custody to try some of the following for the young child.

- picture albums showing the child with Mom/Dad, photos of activities together
- buy postcards and mail them to the child during your time apart
- make a cassette recording of yourself reading a favorite story to the child

For the older child, disruption of their social life is significant to them plus their stuff.

- create ways for them to maintain contact with friends, especially if there is physical distance between the parents, try to maintain their extracurricular activities and commitments if possible
- help the child create a list of “must have” items to keep track of packing them back and forth between households
- acknowledge the child’s emotions and discuss feelings. If this is impossible for the divorced parents, encourage them to help child establish a trusted adult with whom he/she can share feelings.

I realize that these suggestions require cooperation by the parents, but if we can help them understand the importance of concrete memory blocks for the younger child to build his/her foundation of trust and security for the transitions, it will be a gift to the child. For the older children, cooperation acknowledges the child’s need to have some level of control or choice during important social development and transitions.

Move:

Depending on whether a child will move or has moved, here are some possibilities:

- create a picture album of the old house and new house If a child can tell you a story about the move, help her/him write it or at least label pictures.
- tell stories about your own moves, read stories about moving
- Alexander, Who's Not (Do you hear me? I mean it!) Going to Move, by Judith Viorst is an excellent book about moving.
- suggest to parents that they discuss the move with the child, especially regarding the child's belongings, suggest involving the child with the packing or making a decorated box for the moving of their stuff
- for a child who has moved, offer to take a picture in the new classroom to send to old friends, suggest being a 'pen pal' with past friends

Parent who travels frequently:

Depending on the age of the child, help parent create concrete connections or specific plans to keep in touch

- create cassettes reading favorite stories and make videos of fun times together for use during the absence
- create photo albums of child with parent who is absent
- create a "kisses" bottle for the child or both the child and parent, fill the bottle with kisses and cork it then trade bottles
- have child choose a small object for the traveling parent to take with her/him
- have older child track the travels on a map or make a map of where parent is

We need to learn not to dismiss the grief process in our daily life. Creating a foundation for children to process grief and develop healthy coping styles is indeed an aide to life.

