

## Information Taken from the book “Comforting Children in Crisis”

### Death: Walking Through the Grieving Process with Children

Grief is a very painful emotion, and it can be difficult to see a child hurting. Because of this, adults often try to shield children from the intense emotions that surround the loss of a loved one. But like adults, children need the opportunity to grieve. They experience the same stages of grief as adults, but these stages do not have to go in a certain order or follow a specific timeline. The grief process can range anywhere from a month to several years.

However, children do grieve differently from adults. While adults tend to grieve for an extended period of time, children tend to go in and out of the grieving process because they don’t have the ability to deal with those big feelings on a consistent basis. Here are three of the most basic stages of grief, and how children handle them:

- Shock and disbelief – thinking “this can’t be true,” making comments that a family member will be back soon, asking questions about death.
- Extreme feelings – anger, sadness, aggression, tearfulness, having difficulty concentrating, lashing out at people close to them because they don’t understand their intense feelings.
- Acceptance – starting to move forward without frequent thoughts of the death, returning to normal activities, sharing positive memories of their loved one rather than focusing on their sad feelings.

Children understand death differently at various ages. Here are some ideas for how a child’s age affects his or her understanding of the finality of death:

- Under 6 years old: Most children under 6 won’t be able to understand what it means to never see someone again. They might say, “Is Grandma going to be dead tomorrow?” They will probably ask repetitive questions about what death is in an attempt to understand it.
- 6 to 8 years old: At this age, children start to gain a greater understanding of death. They may see death as a scary thing. They may show signs of guilt, feeling like they somehow caused the death. They may also display fear others around them will die.
- 9 years to teenager: Children will now start to fully understand the finality of death. While they can express their feelings more verbally, they may not choose to initially. At this age, they want to feel accepted by their friends, pastors, teachers, and coaches – if a parent dies, they may feel different from their friends. Encourage kids this age that their feelings are accepted and normal.

#### Scripture Help:

Psalm 23

Psalm 121

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Jeremiah 31:13

Matthew 7:7-11

John 14:1-4

Romans 8:26-28

Philippians 4:8

Philippians 4:12-13

#### Care Tips for Those Who Want to Help:

- Encourage Active Grieving.  
The healthiest way to grieve is by active grieving, where a person spends time trying to live a normal daily life while still devoting time to expressing feelings of sadness. Adults may spend long periods in active grieving. Children, however, will display brief spurts of sadness or anger.

The rest of the time they may want to play or go about their daily routine. This doesn't mean they don't care – it's normal!

- **Be There.**  
Help children and their families feel cared for. Just knowing that you're there to help will make a big difference. Be available to the grieving family, and follow their lead in finding ways to help.
- **Listen.**  
It's helpful for a grieving child to have someone outside the family to talk to. Don't judge or feel like you have to give advice – just listen. In any given conversation, the child may or may not want to talk about the death. Be available to listen to whatever the child wants to talk about.
- **Help with daily chores.**  
The details of daily life can be overwhelming to a grieving family. Take them dinner, offer to pick the kids up from school, spend time with the children while the family is making funeral arrangements. The family may not feel comfortable asking for help, so don't wait for an invitation. Think of a few practical things you could do for the family, and then offer.
- **Show love.**  
Death can make children feel insecure and frightened. If you know the family well, give the child a loving hug. If a hug isn't appropriate, a gentle pat on the shoulder and a few kind words can help the child feel less isolated.
- **Pray.**  
Pray with and for the family. Let them know that others are praying for them, too. Even if the family feels too overwhelmed or even too angry, to pray for themselves, they'll know that others are caring for them on a spiritual level.

Things you can say to a grieving child:

- **"It's OK to cry."**  
Children don't know how to deal with strong emotions. Letting them know that those emotions are normal and that it's OK to express them will help them grieve.
- **Share Memories.**  
Remind the child of the good things about the family member. Help the child reminisce about his or her own fond memories of the loved one.
- **"What do you miss most?"**  
Help a child share feeling by asking clear questions that can't be answered with a simple yes or no. This will give the child a starting place to sort out his or her feelings.
- **"I don't know what to say, but I'm here for you."**  
If you don't know what to say, admit it. You can't take away the child's pain, but you can let him or her know that you care and want to help. The most important gift you can give is listening.
- **"He or she loved you so much."**  
A grieving child longs for the loving touches and words that are now missing. Remind the child of how much the deceased loved him or her, and recall times you saw that love in action.