

## Children grieve too

Grief is a universal experience felt by children and adults alike. When a child loses someone she loves you cannot protect her from grief. She needs to feel and express it as much as you do. The most loving thing you can do for the child is to guide her through her grief.

At this time, the child needs you to:

- Be honest with her;
- Love and reassure her;
- Include her in the funeral ritual; and
- Allow her to express her grief in her own way.



## Grieving Children at School

To a grieving child, school can be an excellent source of support. If you are the child's teacher you can greatly assist in his recovery by:

- Giving him the opportunity to talk to you about the death;
- Answering his questions honestly in simple, concrete language;
- Observing his behaviour for signs that he is not coping;
- Being patient and encouraging; and
- Giving him strategies for his school work.

When it is a classmate who has died, you can be a source of comfort and reassurance to all of your students. Do not feel apologetic for expressing emotion in the classroom – this shows the students it is safe and acceptable for them to do the same. Know that they will experience all kinds of emotions: shock, anger, curiosity, fear, and deep sadness. The death of a classmate will confront them with their own mortality, and they will turn to you for guidance. You may wish to seek the help of a grief counsellor at this time.

As a teacher, you are in a unique position to educate children about death before they lose someone close. A news story or the loss of a pet is an opportunity for children to voice their fears and concerns.

We offer this brochure as a means to convey our support. This brochure is not meant to replace the professional guidance of a psychologist or counsellor. As you move through this difficult time, please seek professional help if necessary.



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BEING THERE FOR  
*a child who is grieving*



because *life* is important





## Honesty

Children acquire an idea of death from a number of sources, including fairytales, television, school friends, and the adults in their lives. Preschool children often see death as temporary and reversible, and may ask when their loved one is coming back. Some children feel responsible, particularly if they once “wished” someone dead in anger.

Talking openly to a child about death can be confronting as it involves facing your own ideas and feelings about death. You may be tempted to use fairytales or euphemisms to soften the facts. However honesty is essential to the child’s recovery, both to reassure the child that he is not at fault and to help him accept his loss. Let the child’s questions be your guide; they will tell you what he is ready to hear. Be assured that you will not harm the child with the truth; you will help him to heal.

The child’s questions may touch on religion and the “meaning” of the life and death cycle. Take the opportunity to share what you truly believe. Don’t dismay if you can’t answer every question. It is enough that you are communicating with love.

## Security and Love

A grieving child needs to feel that she is not alone. When you are grieving, too, it is important that you share your grief with the child. By shutting yourself off you will only hurt and confuse her. She may think that she has made you sad or angry, and this can feel worse than her grief. If you are having trouble coping, let the child know. Be there for her when she needs to talk or simply to be held. So long as you keep communication open between you she will know that she is loved.

## Sharing the Funeral Ritual

While it is natural to want to protect the child from the funeral, he needs to be included. The funeral is a significant ritual for all ages, for it begins the healing process. Participation will help your child accept the reality of his loss, provide him with an outlet to express his grief within a supportive group, and enable him to honour and celebrate the life of his loved one. Your child may like to help plan or take part in the service. By inviting him to do so, you show him that his feelings matter.

In the days before the funeral, take some time to explain the process to your child. It may even help to visit the funeral home. Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer with simple and concrete language.

### *Give specific information, including:*

- What a funeral is, and why we have them;
- What the room will look like and who will be there;
- What the casket and body will look like;
- What cremation is and what happens to the ashes (reassure the child that a dead person doesn’t feel any pain);
- What emotions he will see – the smiles and the tears as a life is celebrated and mourned.

On the day of the funeral, it may help you to have a secondary carer for your child. This will allow you time out to freely express your own grief, and to talk with the other guests.

If your child does not want to attend the funeral, do not force him. Allow him to create his own ritual, perhaps by lighting a candle or saying a prayer. Explain that there are many ways of showing love, and all have special meaning.

## Moving through Grief

Grief is unique to everyone, and particularly to children. There is no “normal” way of expressing grief – it is not

experienced in neat stages. Like you, your child will have good days and bad days. She may experience the full gamut of emotions, from anger to yearning, melancholy to acceptance. And she may act out her grief by being loud, noisy and temperamental, or by acting younger than she is to gain attention.

Understand that children often express grief little by little, in waves. This may continue over a long period of time, and at unexpected moments. Do not be surprised if one minute your child is in tears and the next she is playing and laughing with her friends. It is important that you do not judge this behaviour, but accept it as your child’s way of coming to terms with her loss.

Make it safe for the child to express her feelings openly; listen when she needs to talk, hug her when she needs comfort, and where possible teach her to direct her emotional energy into other activities. Your child’s loss may make her feel insecure, abandoned or unworthy. Look for ways to build her confidence, to reassure her that she is loved and worthwhile.

Sometimes children experience serious problems with grief. If you are concerned for your child, seek the help of a counsellor, hospice or church group.

*With your help, they will grow to understand that death is a natural and permanent part of life, just as grief is a natural and permanent part of love. As life and love are to be embraced, so then must death and grief be experienced and shared. In sharing, we find the path to healing.*