

Helping Children and Youth Cope with Trauma and Grief

How we help children deal with grief and loss determines how they will develop coping skills as they mature. Some things to remember:

- Listen to them, but don't force them to share; let it come naturally. One of the most important needs after a trauma is to talk about the event—often. It may be difficult for you to hear about, or you may tire of hearing the same story, but talking is a crucial part of recovery. Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting. Don't try to make it okay; let them express fears, thoughts, and worries.
- Give honest information about the tragedy and deaths based on the child's maturity level. Always be truthful. Avoid euphemisms with children. Tell the child that someone died rather than saying someone "went to sleep" or "went away" because younger children will wonder when they are coming back or be hurt that they left without saying goodbye.
- Keep all promises you make to your child during the crisis. In other words, do not make promises you cannot keep. It is important that your child can count on you when all else is in chaos.
- It's okay to tell your child that you don't have all the answers to his or her questions. Validate their thoughtful questioning.
- Be available to talk to your kids. Talk about the loss/trauma as a family. Sharing can be very healing for everyone. Silence can make children feel isolated, and may convey the message that they should limit their grieving.
- Like adults, children grieve at their own pace. Respect where they are in that process.
- Allow the child to express all the emotions he or she is feeling. Children need to know that their feelings are normal grief feelings even though they might not be normal feelings under other circumstances. If feelings such as anger or guilt persist for many months, professional help might be necessary to help them resolve those feelings.
- Very young children who may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings may express them through other means such as play-acting and/or drawing. Help them name what they are expressing.
- Older children are drawn together in situations of tragedy and will draw strength and support from each other. Give liberty to teenagers around how they make themselves feel better, i.e. turning the stereo on loud, talking on the phone more than usual to their friends. Allow them privacy (both in physical space and to deal with their feelings) if they need it.
- Death in a child's life is inevitable and means different things to children at different ages. Young children (ages 1-5) grieve for the threat to their security, while children six years of age and older grieve more for the actual loss.
- If bereaved children indicate in any way that they want help or counseling, get it for them immediately. Most children are hesitant to ask openly for formal counseling, so if this happens, consider it a blatant cry for help.
- Don't expect your child to take care of your fears, i.e. don't keep your child home from school because you are afraid to be separated from him or her. Find help to cope with your fears.