

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS THROUGH A DEATH OR DIVORCE

Remember these tips to effectively assist children in the healing process following loss:

★ Be aware that the varied reactions of children in grief are usually normal expressions of loss and are not usually signs of disturbed behavior. Sometimes children react by being mad when they are really sad or expressing anger when it is really doubt or confusion they are feeling. Children may grieve in spurts, crying one minute, laughing the next. They may lash out at parents or other caregivers they think could have prevented the loss. It's important to be sensitive to the complex processes involved in grieving a loss.

★ Acknowledge the grief in children who have experienced a loss and allow them to confront and mourn the loss. Don't let children become the forgotten mourners. Let them know their grief will not be discounted, ignored or considered unimportant or less than the grief of any other individual.

★ In the event of a death, include children in the mourning process as much as possible allowing children who are old enough or express a wish to do so to be include in memorial services, for rituals are a part of life and can offer time to say goodbye and provide an opportunity for closure. Remember to explain to children beforehand what a funeral and/or wake is, what happens during this time, the purpose of these rituals and appropriate behavior.

★ Encourage children to talk about the loss immediately following the loss and frequently thereafter even if it means going over the loss repeatedly. Let them know it is okay to express themselves as they need to, in whatever way they are comfortable. Show children that they need not be afraid to talk about the loss or show open signs of emotion such as sadness or tears.

★ Make a special effort to REALLY LISTEN to what children are saying or trying to say, helping them to express doubt, thoughts, questions and concerns without putting your own thoughts and feelings into words for them.

★ Answer their questions with honesty and forthrightness using language that is simple and easy to understand. It's okay to tell children, "I can't give you a good answer, there is no explanation", "No, it isn't fair what happened", or "I worry about that too".

★ Be careful not to use evasive terms or cliches such as, "he went away", "she went to sleep", or "God wanted your sister with Him because she was so good".

★ Find other children to talk to each other about the loss as grieving children can be a great source of support for one another. Search out a local RAINBOWS in your area.

★ Allow children to express memories or recollections, whether happy or sad, through a diary, journal, photo album or memory box. Direct children in playing games, storytelling or in other activities in which they can express their feelings of loss.

★ Show visible signs of love, support, caring and patience with physical signs of affection such as frequent hugging or warm expressions of care and concern.

★ Try, as far as possible, to maintain a normal routine, as children need the security of knowing that their world will remain intact and life goes on even though there have been major changes in their life.

★ Obtain helpful books and other informational materials to explain terms, expressions, processes and rituals to reduce misunderstanding, confusion and fear.

★ Seek out professional assistance if a child's needs or fears seem to last unusually long or seem unusually severe.

★ Be a role model for grieving children, even if you are grieving yourself. The display of legitimate emotions, such as tears, controlled anger or fear doesn't harm children. What is harmful is denying the grief, refusing to talk or let others talk about the loss, displaying irrational anger or guilt or extending blame after a loss. Parents and other adults need to show children open and compassionate ways to mourn.

This article was adapted with permission of the National SIDS Resource Center, Vienna, Virginia.