

Somebody I Love Died Today Helping Children Cope With Death

***NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP
I PRAY THE LORD MY SOUL TO KEEP
IF I SHOULD DIED BEFORE I WAKE
I PRAY THE LORD MY SOUL TO TAKE***



A universal child's prayer, meant to give comfort, it may, instead, inspire FEAR. Although many parents refuse to give voice to a child's fears and concerns about death, they religiously sponsor the utterance of these few words each night. Is this our only introduction to Death? For many children, it is the sum total of a family's communications about death, loss and grief.

"If I should die before I wake" ...a terrifying thought for many children. How can we expect children to go to bed peacefully if we leave them with that thought?

Virtually every child will experience the loss of a pet, friend, relative or neighbor sometime during their school years. By the time a child is 5, they know that SQUASHED BUGS MADE MOM SICK, BELLY UP GOLDFISH GET FLUSHED and EVERYONE MUST WHISPER WHEN SOMEONE DIES.

One out of every 20 children will face the death of a parent or stepparent during their childhood. Every child will experience the death of someone or something they love. Yet, children are often shuttled off or

ignored by adults who may be grieving themselves and do not have the energy, resources or understanding necessary to help. Society tends to pacify itself with the rationale that “children are resilient” and thus, fails to recognize that children need as much compassion and concerned support as adults require in adapting to dramatic or traumatic changes in their lives.

Loss, regardless of the cause, challenges the communication skills of both children and adults. Adults who are dealing with their own sense of loss and helplessness may find it difficult to respond to children’s needs and questions. And so, we perpetuate the CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE because we don’t know what to say or maybe even realize that we can say something.

We like to think that children don’t understand loss and we really like to think that kids don’t understand death at all! Let’s look at some of the myths about children and grief.





Children don't understand death. Therefore, they don't grieve

Most people do not believe that children, especially very young children have any concepts about death. Yet, we know that even very young children can respond to changes in their environment and certainly a death in a family brings about changes in the family environment. While a child may not have a clear understanding of the “*why*” of something, he or she will respond to the “*that*” of something. The change of routine, the increased volume of noise and activity in a grieving household are all changes that will affect children and while they may not understand *WHY* these changes are occurring, they will be able to notice *THAT* they have occurred and will respond accordingly. One does not have to understand *why* something occurs in order to respond to it. Children *do* grieve, just not like adults.



Everyone grieves the same way, in a logical & orderly progression.

Grief is not a nice, neat series of steps and stages upon which we play and when we have completed one stage, we move to another. Grief, although it is often written about as being in stages or phases, is more like a roller coaster or a tornado. It is cataclysmic, random and seemingly whimsical in nature. While there are some commonly recognized parts of the grieving process, everyone will experience grief in their own unique way. No two people will grieve alike just as no two people will do anything else alike!

Just as each person has unique behavior patterns and expressions of emotions, so too, will each person experience grief in a unique and highly personal way. Once we determine that everyone *SHOULD* grieve in the same way, we have limited the range of human emotions and experiences

and have negated the infinite variety of the human experience. There are as many ways to grieve as there are people to grieve.



Infants/toddlers are too young to grieve/mourn

Even the very young child will respond to the changes in his or her environment, even if they do not understand the reason for the changes. If a child is old enough to love and “attach”, he is old enough to grieve. As the child grows, he will often be given memories of the deceased and may eventually call those memories his own. While a young child may have never met Grandpa, with a healthy and loving family to share Grandpa’s memory, that child will grieve the death and loss of his Grandpa.

Look for behavior changes that indicate responses to a change environment to indicate an infant and pre-walkers’ grief. Increased demands for attention, loss of schedules such as sleeping all night or eating at certain times, regression to previously suspended self-comforting measures (thumb sucking, rocking, drinking from a bottle, etc) are all signs of an infant/toddlers expressions of grief over some change in his life. Remember, they do not have to know the reason *why* something happens in order to experience the emotions of grief because something *did* happen.



Children are resilient. They “bounce back”

While children are, indeed, flexible both physically and emotionally, they are not rubber balls and do not simply “bounce back” from difficult experiences. They, like adults, must integrate their experiences into their knowledge base and must find explanations for what happens to them. When appropriate explanations are not available, children will create their own answers and explanations, regardless of the accuracy of their conclusions. Often these explanations or “chains of consequence” are

accurate only on the surface and may cause even greater grief that reality might warrant. Children see and hear *everything*, but lack the perspective and experience necessary to draw appropriate conclusions.

Children will often grieve in short bursts of emotion rather than dwell on a particular feeling like adults tend to do. The younger the child, the more quickly a “grief moment” may pass, but make no mistake about thinking a child is not grieving just because that child is playing outside or laughing at a cartoon. They need as much compassionate understanding and support as adults do as they struggle through their grief.



Childhood bereavement always leads to a maladjusted adult life.

While bereavement during childhood is certainly a traumatic experience, it does not necessarily mean a “doomed adulthood.” If a child receives appropriate and adequate support during a bereavement experience, she will integrate the loss into her being and adapt appropriately. Children who do not receive adequate and appropriate support and have not learned effective coping methods, however, can often experience delayed grief reactions and engage in inappropriate and destructive behaviors.

While any bereavement experience is difficult, being bereaved does not automatically qualify someone for a maladaptive life!



Children are not affected by adults’ grief

Children are like sponges, absorbing everything they see, hear and touch. Nothing escapes their vision! However, children may not have the experience base, the perceptions or the cognitive abilities to process the information they receive in totally appropriate ways. Therefore, children ARE affected by the grief they see the adults around them expressing.

This does not have to mean they are affected in negative ways, however. Many adults express their grief in completely appropriate and effective ways and children learn from observing these grieving patterns and styles. They will absorb both appropriate and inappropriate ways to experience loss. Adults should be aware of the power of their actions and words when expressing their grief as children are often the “unseen audience” for such performances.

Children can learn to be compassionate, kind, supportive and patient by observing these traits being modeled by their significant adults. They can also learn to become impatient, intolerant and cruel. Children who receive honest communications, patient teaching and supportive modeling will learn to embrace their emotions and to find healthy, nondestructive ways to express their grief.



Speaking of the deceased will reopen a child’s grief wounds.

This is a commonly held myth for many cultures. It is believed that continuing to speak of the deceased and expressing the emotions of grief will add to one’s grief experience rather than help dissipate the emotions. For some, this may be true. For most people, however, expressing their grief and staying connected to the deceased through the sharing of memories helps with the integration of the loss and the changing of the relationship. You don’t stop loving someone just because that person died so why should you stop connecting with the loved one in positive and appropriate ways?

It is the hiding of the pictures and never speaking again of the deceased that often keeps the wounds of grief open and flowing. People *DIE*, but we do not *LOSE* them unless we abandon the love and the memories that keep us connected.

Encouraging the sharing of memories helps establish a new relationship with the deceased. You are still a daughter even after your mother dies and you are still a child after your parent dies. The nature of the relationship will change, of course, but the connection is far deeper than death can destroy.



Children should be PROTECTED and SHIELDED from the pain of grief

Many adults believe this to be true simply because they cannot face their own grief reactions. Grief hurts! It is not a sign of weakness nor a lack of faith. Grief is the price you pay for love and when someone you love dies, it does hurt. While it may seem kinder to shield a child from experiencing the pain of grief, **Hurt and pain have their lessons and we cannot rob ourselves of the richness of the tapestry that hurt and love weave together. To eliminate one from the loom is to break the thread and steal away the fabric.**

One can learn to embrace the emotions of grief and grow through the hurt to reach the other side of grief where memories can sustain us in our sorrow. Children can be guided through their own grief journey with the help of supportive adults who understand the wisdom of learning how to embrace all of the emotions of life.



Children cope with grief more easily if they have LOTS of activities.

This is a common mistake when working with children. It is based more on the adults' fear of not being able to answer a child's questions or know what to do or say than it is based on any research or practice. The idea behind this myth is the thought that if children are kept busy they won't have the time or energy to think, to experience grief or to ask questions that the

adults may not have the answers to. Keeping children busy simply as a way to avoid difficult questions and issues is a temporary “fix” at best.

Children are not unaware of what is happening around them and they will think about death, experience it and question it whether they are busy putting a puzzle together or lying quietly on their bed. Establishing and maintaining open communication lines is one of the most positive actions adults can take to help children process their experiences with death and grief.



Children don't hurt as much because they understand less.

This myth reflects a misperception that because children are less experienced and knowledgeable, they will not hurt as deeply as those with more knowledge and experience. Perhaps the opposite is true. When one has little information and limited experiences, reality may seem more scary and overwhelming than when information and support are readily available.

Children need age appropriate information, skills to identify their emotions and ways to express them in order to appropriately cope with death and grief. Size has nothing to do with the hurt in one's heart.

The American culture (which in reality is an umbrella for many different cultures within our borders) has a great reluctance to talk openly about death. We are one of the most “death denying” cultures today. We simply do not like discussing death in any form. In fact, we don't even like to use the word “died”.

Think of the many ways we, in this country, can talk about someone having “died” without actually using the word “died”. See if you can list some of the expressions we use.

People don't *DIE* in America, they:

Pass away	Pass on
Go to Heaven	Cross Over
Go to be with the angels (God, Jesus, Grandma, etc)	
Go to sleep	Check out
Kick the Bucket	Bought the farm
Expire	Pushing up daisies
Croak	Are deceased
Bite the dust	6 feet under
Meet their maker	Enter Eternal Rest
We LOST him*	

*Currently the most popular expression.



Why are we so reluctant to simply say the word “died”? Does it reflect on our superstitions or our fears or is the word simply too harsh? “Died” is certainly a difficult word to use, but none of the other expressions are accurate or honest. They reflect a great adversity to a simple consequence of life. If one lives, then one also dies and so far, no one has been able to alter that equation.

Regardless of your religious beliefs or philosophies regarding life and death and everything in between, when someone you love dies, they are still a part of who you are. You will continue to love that person, perhaps to “talk” with that person, maybe even seek “guidance” or support from the love you experienced with that person. Your loved one will continue to occupy “space” in your life and in your being and it seems sad and completely inaccurate to say that you “lost” that person.

And when you are discussing this with a child, remember that young children especially, think in concrete terms, not abstract ones. So when you say you “lost” Grandma, a young child may ask you to go find Grandma. Children have been taught to find the items they have lost, so it makes

perfect sense for them to request that you help them search for the person who has become “lost”. Far better to say “died” than to have to explain that you don’t really mean “lost” like in “lost a toy”...the more you try to untwist that explanation, the more twisted it will become. And if you think about it, “died” is a difficult word to use, but “lost” is a hopeless one.

