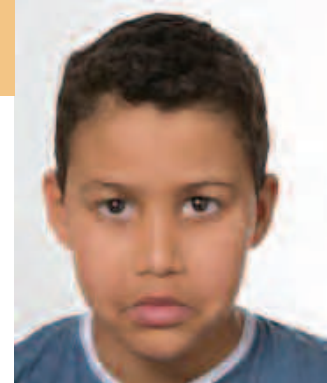


THE AFTER A DEATH SERIES

What About the Children?



It breaks our hearts, it troubles our minds, it rattles our souls; seeing children we love devastated, weeping, sorrow-filled. We want to fix it and we can't. I can't just go out and buy a new daddy; I could always do that with broken Barbies. I can't put a band-aid on it. I can't kiss it and make it stop hurting. I can't even tell her it will be all right. All I can do is hold her and help her cry. (Mom in Seattle)

Everyone who devotes their lives to helping grieving children agrees that there are at least four tasks for grieving children. In a way, they apply to all of us, for when we grieve we are indeed like children.

1. Recognize the reality of the death.

Probably the single most important thing you can do to help the children in your family is to be honest. When her mother shot herself when Margo was four, the children were told their mother went on vacation. Then her clothes and belongings were gone. She just disappeared. The next year when their father told the children they were going on vacation, he couldn't figure out why they were terrified. Children deserve to know the truth. Use the real words: "dead" and "died." Explain what happened. If the death was violent, the children will find out what happened sooner or later and it's best if they find out from you or some other loving family member. Secrets can hurt. Welcome their questions. Getting honest answers helps them grieve in healthy ways.

2. Grieve the death.

Children, especially younger ones, tend to grieve, play, grieve, play, ask questions, and grieve again. Jon was 11 years old when we sat on the floor together. "What's the single most important thing adults need to know

about grieving children?" I asked him. "Tell them every day's not a bad day for us," he said. The British talk about "puddle jumping" where children jump into puddles of water then out again. They often grieve that way, too - jumping into it, then out again; while we adults tend to sit in the puddle and wallow in our grief.

3. Commemorate the person who died.

When someone dies, we all need to DO something. Talking about their person who died and making something that helps us to remember that person can be tremendously healing. Children have made comfort pillows out of a piece of clothing worn by their loved one, kids have worn their grandfather's shirts, made angel bookmarks and done scores of other activities that let them know their person lives on in their hearts. Families can do significant things together such as picnicking at the gravesite, releasing balloons, planting a tree or garden or even a potted plant. Remembering and celebrating the life lived is important.

4. Move on to new relationships, including one with the person who died.

I don't remember the name of the movie, but I will never forget a young Barbara Streisand sitting by a tree, leaning against a stone, talking heart-to-heart with her grandfather. After awhile she said, "Well, Gramps, gotta go." As she stood up we could see a funeral procession entering a cemetery and realized the stone was a grave marker. She had been sitting on Gramps' grave having a chat and a new relationship with her grandfather. New relationships don't just occur with the person who died. When Ben's brother was murdered, Ben became the oldest sibling - everything in the family order shifted. Christina's father died and at

age 15 she became one of the family breadwinners. Going to Grandmother's for the holidays is different without Grandpa there. All relationships will be new in a way. Building new relationships, like dealing with grief, takes time.

There are many things you can do to help grieving children in your family. Find out if there is a center for grieving children near you and make an appointment. Your funeral director, pastor or social worker should know or can find one through the internet. These centers are wonderful and seeing children helping children is awesome.

■ Gather resources.

There are dozens of extremely helpful books and videos available, both for children and for you and your family. Whoever gave you this article will know how to get them.

■ Tend your own grief.

Let the children know you will be sad for a long time. Let them know that every single person in the world hurts like this at sometime. Let them know you can all cry together and that they don't have to take care of you. Let them know their job right now is to be kids and that sad or happy, crying or laughing, you'll be there for them, as will a lot of other people who love them and want to help.

■ Remember, you don't have to do it all alone.

Even though I was a girl, right after we came from the funeral, my grandmother let me go with the boys in the family and pick through our grandfather's tools. Last year I used the old hammer I picked out to hang the first picture in our new baby's nursery. (Karyn)

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