



When Helping Children Deal With Death...

Some Points to Remember:

1. Children react differently than adults. Because they cannot tolerate intense feelings for a long time, they may not seem to be grieving when compared to the adults around them. In fact, younger children may work through some of their feelings related to the loss through play.
2. The reactions of children are often conditioned by the reactions of the adults around them. For example, if they see adults expressing feelings and talking about how they feel, they may be more comfortable doing so themselves. Conversely, if they hear adults say things like “we’ll never get through this”, they may begin to believe that message too.
3. In assessing the degree to which children are impacted by a traumatic death, be sure to compare the way they are currently acting to their behavior prior to the trauma. Attention difficulties, for example, can look like a byproduct of mourning and may be handled inappropriately if they are actually a symptom of a learning disorder.
4. Also consider developmental stage when determining the child’s reaction to loss. Latency age boys, in particular, are often preoccupied with themes of death and destruction. Observing these themes in play and school work is normal and does not necessarily signal an angry or inappropriate reaction to loss.
5. Other traumatic events or losses in the life of the family may be reactivated by the current loss. Explaining this to families and children is often extremely reassuring.
6. With both children and their families, one of the most helpful strategies is to focus on their strengths and competencies. Acknowledging effective coping techniques provides families with hope that they are resilient enough to get through the challenges that face them.
7. Exposure to the trauma, either through the media or conversation, can complicate the recovery process. Limit the amount of television viewing related to the trauma and its consequences and encourage adults to monitor conversations held within earshot of the children.
8. Talking about what happened with children is helpful. Remember that they may ask the same question a hundred times in an attempt to come to terms emotionally with the answer and it’s important to give them the same answer each time. It’s also important that everyone in the family present the same story to the children. Particularly in this situation, adults must be comfortable with the answer “I don’t know.” Everyone struggles with questions in life for which there is no answer.
9. When seeking professional help for children, make sure that the mental health practitioner to whom the family is referred has experience in dealing with traumatic losses. The type of grief these types of losses engender is more complicated than normal grief and is best addressed by a professional with special training and experience.