
An Approach to Supporting Children's Grief

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The Hospice Bereavement Training Manual and grief support organizations describe varying methodologies for dealing with grief,. By way of reminder, the Kubler-Ross methodology of the *Stages of Grief* is well known but written for people who have learned they are dying and not addressed to the griever left behind. To recommend one method over another would tell people how they should grieve without options,. So, we mention different methods that have helped many people through their journey and grief work.

Addressing children, one of our favorite approaches has three elements:

1. Technique
2. Common Communication
3. Describing the Grief

Technique

Focus on taking time with their grief:

- Grief support is on an individual level and not a "one size fits all" approach.
- The Tasks of Mourning as proposed by William Worden in *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* include:
 - ♦ Accepting that your loss is real.
 - ♦ Processing the pain of your grief.
 - ♦ Adjusting to the world without your loved one.
 - ♦ Finding a lasting connection with your loved one while moving forward on a new path, a new life.

Common Communication

We want to speak the same language with terms familiar to children. Use words that kids use. Communicate what grief looks like to them. What does it mean to have a loss?

Describing the Grief

The definitions of grief, mourning, and bereavement are different but often used interchangeably:

How is my body feeling today? Does my stomach hurt? Are my muscles sore?

Is my brain working ok? Do I forget things more than I did before the loss?

What kind of changes have happened with my family and friends since my loss?

How have I been acting? Have I been keeping to myself? Have I been acting to get me in trouble?

Have I been thinking about big questions (e.g., "Why did this happen?" "Why am I here?" Or "Where is God?")?

Also, many factors shape the grief:

- The age of the child determines how the death will be perceived. Boys and girls can perceive and respond similarly, or differently. Also, grief can change when they reach different stages in life like from childhood to adolescence. This is known as *Milestone Grieving*, also called *Grief Anew*. Children grieve the loss of a parent or sibling that happened even before their birth. Now at age 13, for example, they experience a new form of grief.
- Is the child from a culture where death and mourning are present and visual, or is the child from a culture of grief suppression and avoidance?
- What are the spiritual belief systems the child is under? *Is Mommy with Jesus? Is Mommy only in my memory? Or Is Mommy now alive in the spirit world?*
- What is the child's personality like? Open to the conversation? Scared?

Other examples of things good to talk about with children:

- *Who was your mommy? What was she like?*
- *What did she mean to you?*
- *Did you attend a funeral or memorial service? (Find out what kind of support system the child has.)*
- *How is your family coping?*