

WE CAN HELP THE SURVIVING CHILDREN

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We would like to protect our children from the hard parts of life, but we can't. When death comes to our house, the surviving children are affected too and we do well to think about how our kids respond and how we can help them, and how we can let them help us.

I.

Before we talk about the special ways kids have in confronting death, there are some points we can remember as we relate to them.

1. Kids have to be allowed to respond to the death in their own way.

The loss they have experienced is different to them than the loss we have known.

We have lost a child, the hope of our future, the part of ourselves, which will carry on after us.

They have lost a brother or sister with whom they had a very different relationship.

An older brother could be the one who picked on them a lot, who seemed to get all the privileges, who protected them from other kids at school, who covered for them to mom and dad, or who tattled on them when they goofed off.

A younger brother or sister might be the one they had to stay and watch when they would rather be with their friends, who was the little brat that was always knocking them down when they wanted to be grown up, who they had to share things with when they didn't want to, who they could feel superior to and boss around, who they could feel good about when they taught them a new place to go.

That is a different loss than parents have experienced. So kids will respond to their loss, not ours.

Beyond that, children are individuals who have, rather early, developed their own special ways of dealing with problematic reality.

So they may not show their grief in ways we would like them to, or they may take different paths through their grief than we might if we were in their shoes.

As individual, their grief may be on a different schedule than ours so they may have different rhythms to their grief or spend shorter or longer time in acute grief than we do.

They may come up with a different answers to the meaning of death, different religious answers, than we do.

We have to respect their individuality as well as respect and maintain the bond between us and them. We do our kids no favor when we want or expect them (whether we say it or not) to respond in ways that we would like.

When we are down and the child is acting as if nothing is wrong, we do not help that child by making them feel guilty for not feeling at that moment as we do.

If we need to talk, but the child does not seem interested or cannot manage it at that time, we need to find ways of allowing them to be themselves at the same time we remain true to ourselves.

2. In our grieving, we should not exclude the child.

When we are hurting badly, we often want to withdraw into ourselves, yet if the kids are little, they make demands on us. We are deep in crying and overwhelmed by the basic evil of a sense of the universe and the child wants a glass of water or the car keys. So our response to the child is likely to be inappropriate to them. We seem to be angry without reason or we seem not to be there when they need us and so they feel estranged from us.

We can share our grieving with the child and let the child know that it is our grief and not them that is making us act this way. Children can understand if we let them, but, especially when they are under ten, we cannot expect them to read our behavior as adults can.

If we share how we are feeling and thinking, we give the child a great gift, for we have shown the child the depth of grief and also some possible ways grief can be resolved.

II.

Researchers have given us some concepts which can help us understand how children grieve. We need to note, however, that there are no absolute ideas or molds into which kids fall, just because they are one age or another.

I want to talk about two areas: Children's understanding of death and their emotional response to death.

1. Children's understanding of death.

There is no age after about two years at which children do not understand what death is if they are given adequate explanation. But very young children are likely to be confused if we talk to them in a distorted language.

If cars have “dead” batteries and fans yell “kill the umpire” at the ball game, but a person has “passed” or was “lost” we should not be surprised if kids don’t know what we are talking about.

Children up to about age seven may not seem to take death too seriously because they don’t understand that it is a real change and that it is not reversible. So the dead are in heaven or under ground, but they eat, sleep and play there just like they would have done when they are alive.

A friend of mine was helping plan a birthday party for a four year old a few weeks after the child’s mother had died. The girl said matter-of-factly, “my mother can’t come because she is dead.”

These children may not distinguish between death as adults do. One child comforted his grandfather after the death of his grandmother by saying the duck in his preschool died, so he understood just how grandpa felt. Children over seven years however share our adult conceptions about death and should be able to understand any explanation we give.

2. Children’s emotional response to death.

For children under seven years (please understand I only use these ages as rough estimates, kids develop faster and slower) the problem death presents is separation and the fear of separation, especially from the mother or primary care giver. This fear of separation, especially after the death of a sibling, may be expressed by clinging close or perhaps a regression of behavior appropriate to much younger ages when the mother was more immediately involved with their physical activities like eating, toileting, or dressing. It can also express itself as a withdrawal and a determination not to need the parents. At this age children have a real feeling of power in the world. The sun rises so they can have a day and goes down so they can have a night. Words can also have a magic power, so to call someone a name, or to damn them or to wish them dead has the same force as reality. If therefore, a child has wished them dead (as most of us have to our siblings at some point) and then they die, the child may very well feel as if he/she caused the death. From about seven to twelve (again take the age with a grain of salt) the problem with death is aggressions.

Death is personified as something that comes to get you. Our culture has a lot of such personifications: Darth Vader, the grim reaper, the bogey man. Death may very well be connected with the aggressive forces the child of this age is attempting to control within him/herself as society acceptable ways. If death came and got my brother or sister, it could very well be coming to get me. Those who have read Tom Sawyer know that the best way to ward off such strong aggressive death is to utter magic incantations or to do ritual things like putting special objects in special places. We will sometimes find children acting in ways to ward off the reaper.

Children over about twelve or thirteen respond to death much the same as adults. The problem death presents especially strong to some adolescents (though I see it strongly too

in parents who have lost children) is philosophical or religious. The fact that death makes them ask serious questions about the justice of God, or about the ultimate meaning of life.

One of the answers to those questions which can get support in adolescent music and literature is a kind of nihilism, a belief that there is no meaning in life so the individual might as well enjoy whatever fleeting pleasure the moment can offer. For other teenagers, the encounter with death can lead to some important and life-long religious and political commitments. Very often adolescents have difficulty expressing emotions connected with death. This may be because they find the encounter with death so frightening that they simply turn off the experience itself and so really don't feel it. It may also be that they are at an age when strong and new feelings are inside them and they have trouble sorting them out and the calm exterior can be a cover for some pretty hard turmoil inside.

There has been some scholarly writing about prolonged psychological problems in children when they have not adequately resolved their grief. It is important to remember when we hear such things, that most children are basically healthy and if given information and communication, can comprehend well. However, if we see major changes in the child's behavior within 18 months after a significant death, it is possible that there are some serious death related problems at work.

Changes which can be important can be in sleep habits, eating, the group the child goes around with, dropping grades and talk of suicide. Such problems are usually not the child's alone, and it is a good idea for the whole family to see a professional helper like a psychologist, trained clergy person or counselor.

But we should not assume that grief is a major problem for many kids. It is the same problem for them it is for us. We recognize the child in us in the ways our children face death.

If we give them the freedom to respond in their own way to the death of a sibling and if we share our grief with our surviving children, we can help them and have them help us.