



By Carrie Hatcher-Kay, PhD

Children experience the same range of emotions that adults do when facing loss: shock, sadness, anger, denial, wishing and bargaining, and ultimately, we hope, acceptance. Often grief can be such an overwhelming experience for adults that it can be hard to have the energy or perspective to address a child's needs. However, as this article and these resources (video, books, and local and online

support groups) suggest, being present to the pain will ultimately, paradoxically, help lighten and heal the grief for parent and child.

The Ann Arbor Public Library has an excellent video entitled *What Do I Tell My Children?* (www.aquariusproductions.com) addressing how kids handle grief. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and other professionals as well as parents and kids are interviewed on the video. The discussion is organized around 4 phases of grieving (stages that overlap and cycle):

Understanding

- Provide as much open and honest feedback as kids seem to be requesting. Let them keep asking questions.
- Very often cues that they want to “talk” about the topic may come indirectly via kids talking for or about their dolls, stuffed animals or pets, rather than volunteering information directly about themselves. You might use these “displacement” figures as an inroad to express the feelings and thoughts you imagine the child might be experiencing. The child will often experience relief by knowing an adult understands how they feel (via talking about what their pet feels) without having to put it into words themselves.
- Protect them from some of the details, depending on their age, but don't hide all the facts or all your tears. They're watching you closely to be sure it's okay to cry, talk, or be silent. They're also watching to be sure you hold it together. They need to see adults managing life and grief together.
- Define death: “when the body totally stops working.” Avoid euphemisms that kids can misconstrue, such as “Grandma went to sleep for a long time.” Try to explain the specific causes of death at a level of detail appropriate to the age of each child.
- If we don't explain death in ways they can make sense of, then they have to guess, and their ideas may be far worse than the actual facts. In other words, children fill in gaps in their knowledge by using their imaginations, and that can create more frightening “facts” than if they had heard the actual information.
- Death is not a nightmare. It's natural. Let them into the room when someone is dying. Let them hold a hand if they choose. Let them hold a pet that has died.
- Until age 4 or 5, magical thinking predominates. For young kids, death is temporary. After you explain death, let them play with their own versions or understanding without hammering in a truth which is beyond their comprehension. Dr. Kübler-Ross spoke of a 4-year-old who said, after they buried his dog, “When the tulips come up, the dog will be out to play again.” She suggested a parent might reply, “That would be lovely”; therefore, letting him hold onto that comfort while not directly agreeing. Kids will keep meeting “reality” and then returning to their fantasies until their cognitive level shifts and they can understand the permanence of death on a different level.
- Let them learn about animals and flowers dying naturally. Expose and discuss, ideally before they have to deal with a person in their life dying.

Grieving

- Adults can take 2-3 years to manage an acute loss and move on (not forget). Kids can take longer. At each new stage, they'll re-process it.
- Drawing pictures and repeating the stories are useful again and again and again.

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Commemorating

- Honor the important place that a person/pet had in the child's heart.
- Let the child plan as much as possible of her or his own remembrances. They need a sense of control over their experience of the death. Let them pick out the clothes they'll wear, or the songs to be sung at their cat's memorial service.
- Make “Remembering Cards” on holidays and birthdays in honor of the deceased.
- Teach what fits for one's own beliefs – that the person lives on in soul, heaven, memories, reincarnation, or in relationships.
- Plant a tree or a little garden to have as a living memorial, a place in one's own yard or other special location, to visit the spirit/memory of the loved one.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S GRIEVING

Moving on

- There is a continuing cycle of life. Model and live into the joy of the present. The deceased would want that.
- Do what it takes in terms of getting help for the grieved. Sometimes meeting with a counselor can help release any blocks to help a child or grown-up get back on developmental track, integrating the loss as part of their rich experience.
- It's not all a loss. There's opportunity in the incredible growth of grieving.

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There are other wonderful resources in the library addressing the topic for a range of ages, relationship to child, and reasons/ways that people (and animals and plants) die. Using characters in stories, they raise the types of feelings and reactions, fears and questions that kids (and all of us) may have at various stages. Obviously, adults would want to review and consider what is most appropriate for a given child's situation before delving in. However, books may help provide a way to address fantasies or worries without requiring that kids directly talk about themselves. It is often a tremendous relief for children when a character puts words to their problems, rather than being forced beyond their developmental ability and comfort range to express a host of confusing thoughts and feelings directly. Here are a few books that put this complex experience into words and art:

- *Don't Despair on Thursdays! The Children's Grief-Management Book* by Adolph Moser and David Melton. Excellent, realistic cartoon description of grief process and tools for healing.
- *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss* by Pat Schwiebert, Chuck DeKlyen and Taylor Bliss. A touching, poetic description of ingredients involved in the process of grieving and healing.
- *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. Quite specific. One could pick several pages without reading it in its entirety.
- *After Charlotte's Mom Died* by Cornelia Spelman. Sad, honest, beautiful.
- *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst. Dear story of a boy whose cat dies. For the funeral, the boy easily finds nine good things to say about Barney. The tenth was harder to come by. He decides that his cat enriches the soil when he is buried.
- *Lifetimes: The beautiful way to explain death to children* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. Of this list, this is the most general intro to death among animals, plants, and people – not too specific or graphic; lovely pictures, poetic.

Carrie Hatcher-Kay, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Ann Arbor who works with adults and youth, supporting the natural process of being present to grieving and to other deep challenges that are part of living. Through teaching and practicing an approach to life centered in curiosity and compassion, she helps clients cultivate mindfulness and is particularly interested in listening to and connecting to one's body as a key resource in healing. Dr. Hatcher-Kay can be reached at her office at (734) 730-3952 or at chatcherkay@gmail.com.

Local Resources Related to Children and Grieving

Ele's Place is a healing center for grieving children, supporting families in the Lansing and Ann Arbor regions and beyond. Ongoing peer support group programs help hundreds of children and teens to cope with the death or life-threatening illness of a parent, sibling or other close family member or friend. For more information, visit www.elesplace.org.

KidsAid (kidsaid.com) is a resource for kids, by kids, and a place to deal with feelings in an e-mail support group, to share and view artwork and stories, and for parents and kids to ask questions and find answers. Its parent site, **GriefNet** (griefnet.org) is directed by Cendra Lynn, PhD, a clinical psychologist and certified traumatologist who works in Ann Arbor. Supported by a dedicated team of volunteers, and by the generous donations of its users, GriefNet and KIDSAID are operated as non-profit corporations under the name Rivendell Resources, Inc. GriefNet and KIDSAID are independent organizations, affiliated only with Virtual Memorials, www.virtual-memorials.com.

The Michigan Grieving Children's Network (www.kidsgrief.org) is led by Laurie Baumer, CEO of Ele's Place in Lansing. For more information, contact her at lbaumer@elesplace.org.

Arbor Hospice (www.arborhospice.org) has grief support services for children, including Art from the HeART, a support group run by an art therapist, which is available for any child in Kindergarten through 8th grade who is grieving the loss of an important person in his or her life. During group sessions, a safe atmosphere is created where children can engage in art expression and discussion, enabling them to continue their grief process. Additionally, specialized support is offered for children and teens in order to help them better understand and cope with the serious illness and approaching death of a loved one. Children aged 4 through 18 can be seen individually during the anticipatory and bereavement period.