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Helping Children Grieve

The Life Center Staff recognizes that you are grieving the loss of someone you love while at the same time helping your child(ren) understand death and grief. We receive many questions from parents or family members asking “How do I tell my child that their family member or friend died.” Later, the questions begin to focus on behaviors or questions a child may ask. The parent wonders is this normal? Teaching children about death and grief is heartwork and it is happening at a time when you are experiencing your own emotions and struggles. For some, there may have been a period of time to prepare and explain death before the loss for others the death may have been very sudden and unexpected. You may be learning about the death at the same time as your child. The information below provides a guideline and helpful suggestions that we have gained through helping other families and children through the grief journey.

Explaining Death to a Child

It is important to explain death in brief and concrete terms using words that your child can understand. Children have wonderful imaginations and may develop their own understanding when we leave death as “going to sleep.” Generally, it is best to describe death as the body has stopped working- the breathing has stopped, the heart is no longer beating. It is also at this time that parents or loved one may add a

statement based on their spiritual beliefs. It is helpful to remember this initial conversation or telling is setting the building blocks. Do not be surprised if you child may need to hear the information again or repeat the story. Also, grief carries over time and a child who experienced a death at 7 years old may have more questions as a teenager.

Many children have been pre-exposed to the word death through school and television news. If a child is older you may explain more based on the child's questions. It is always a good rule to explain to children, especially younger children that they did not cause the death and death is not something that can be spread “like a cold” (contagious).

As final arrangements are made and confirmed, let your child know how your family will remember and celebrate their loved one. If possible your child may have a suggestion or request. Many funeral homes allow pictures and this is an activity a child may wish to participate.

Before the actual service, prepare your child for where he/she is going and what will be seen and experienced. For younger children, families may wish to select someone that can be available to sit with the child if needed outside the service area or if the child needs to play during the gathering after the services.

Grief Feelings

Many people are astounded by the intensity of feelings they experience when grieving. You may hear the phrase, “I did not know I had so many tears” or “I did not think I would ever stop crying.” Children do grieve differently from adults, but it is vital to remember that they have feelings, such as sadness, anger and anxiety. At a young age, they may need adults to name these feelings. “Mom is crying right now because I am sad.” Young children may express their feelings through behaviors, play and art. It is okay for children to have these feelings and it is normal for children to have a grief feeling and then be outside playing within minutes. Young children do not “sit” with their grief like adults.

Anger and anxiety are two specific emotions that children tend to experience and may need special help from adults. Children benefit from adults affirming that anger is a part of grief, as well as teaching healthy ways to express their anger. Anger bottled inside will leak out in other areas or explode. Anger may be felt and expressed soon after the death or manifest later in the grief journey.

Adults are surprised to learn that anxiety is a primary emotion for many grieving children. Teenagers may become more worried about their parents and how this individual is coping. Children may ask, “Who is going to take care of me if my other parent dies? If mom leaves will she come back? Being only ten minutes late may create heightened behaviors. Younger children may show regression in their last achieved developmental milestone. Routine and affirmation is very important. If you have arranged for another adult to meet your child after school, let your child know that morning or before the end of the day, so there are no “surprises.”

Reading a book about death to your child may help initiate conversation and name feelings. There are many wonderful books available and The Life Center keeps a Bibliography List.

Grief Care

How a child is allowed to grieve and the coping skills learned will be remembered and used when faced with future losses. No one can bring back their loved one or change the significant loss but children can heal and grow through grief. Their best role models are you and the other close adults in their lives.

Are you setting aside time for self-care? Making sure that each day you and your child eat a healthy meal? There exists an increasing amount of tasks to be addressed following a death in addition to the impact of grief. Immediately after a death there may have been many family and friends available to assist, but this tends to decrease as others return to their home or jobs. It may be helpful to identify key adults you can trust to be available after school or help with a team practice. Of course, nothing can replace quality time with parents, even if it is for 10 minutes throwing ball in the front yard or stopping for a favorite ice cream cone. Take a break for yourself and your child, leaving the cell phone on silent. In addition, physical activity is essential self-care for children and teens.

Touch base with your child or teen to determine how he or she is coping and is best able to remember their loved one. Younger children may initially cope because they believe their love one is with them all the time, similar to an imaginary friend. Others may find remembering hard because of anger and hurt. A few years later, they may express a fear of forgetting their love one. Many children find comfort in

pictures and watching home movies. Sometimes this is at odds with how the adult is coping or other siblings. Think of a way to affirm and meet each need.

Holiday and anniversaries are grief markers. Does your family celebrate the holiday as in the past or make changes? Ask your child what is important on that day and what would help them remember in a helpful way. For a middle school girl, it may be baking a birthday cake or lighting a candle by their love one's picture. Some families may choose to give back to others rather than remain at home. The holidays under the best circumstances can be stressful- it is okay to say no to certain activities or arrange the day in a manner that helps you and your children manage. Your choices may not match that of another family grieving a loss.

School and Grief

School is a large part of a child or teen's day. We strongly encourage a dialog between the child's parent and school teacher and/or counselor in order to bring awareness that the child has experienced a death and is grieving. Based on your child's needs a teacher's meeting may be beneficial one or two months after the death or whenever either party witnesses significant changes. Children may have a tendency to hold their feelings and check behaviors at school, but the reverse may also be true.

In addition to notifying the school, it is helpful to have a conversation with your child about re-entering the classroom after the loss. For many, school is the safe zone. They may choose not to tell anyone. Teenagers especially do not want to feel different or experience the appearance that people are signaling them out. Children may also choose to have their classmates be told prior

to their return and in this case the teacher may also assist the students in a comfortable re-entry. Adults and friends want to be helpful, but may shy away because they do not know what to say or bring additional hurt.

With communication technology, many people in the community most likely have already heard about the death. Sadly, some of the comments others make are not helpful or even true. Let your child know that he/she has the right to emotionally protect himself in that moment and if information is shared that they do not understand or is different your child can come to you. We have listed several phrases that others have found helpful in these situations.

All of us want our children to perform to their best in school, but the goals and expectations may be modified when grieving. Concentration for children and adults tend to decrease. Help your child with memory devices, such as writing homework assignments and checking the books that are needed before leaving the classroom. They may also need to take breaks between difficult material and subjects. Remember, not only is your child coping with the stress and grief of a loss, he or she is also expected to continuously learn new information.

Finally, from kindergarten to senior year students are exposed to projects and assemblies that may become more sensitive based on this loss. Be your child's best advocate and think creatively with him or her about how to adapt and manage this experience. You may need to speak to the teacher or counselor to also make them aware.

Helpful Phrases

Thank you, but I would rather not talk about that right now.

That is personal.

That is private.

That is painful.

Please do not ask me about that right now.

Grief Activities

- Memory Book- Request family members and friends write memories of the love one to collect in a special scrapbook.
- Question Jar- Place a decorated jar or box in the home where the child can write down questions.
- Special Object- Allow the child if old enough to select a special object to remember his/her love one. Some have also selected something small enough to keep with them- in their wallet, pocket, backpack or necklace.
- A memory quilt using the individual's clothes to create squares or design based on a special memory.
- Keeping a picture of the individual in their room.
- Lighting a candle
- Journaling
- Creating music
- Becoming involved with an organization or charity event related to the person or maybe the disease. For example, a 5k walk/run or fundraising for a scholarship fund.
- Play

Chesapeake Life Center, Hospice of the Chesapeake

Chesapeake Life Center provides compassionate care to individuals and families whose lives are in transition from advanced illness or death of a loved one through support services and education. For children, Chesapeake Life Center has trained counselors available to provide individual or family counseling as well as our Stepping Stones program and weekend bereavement camp, Camp Nabi and Phoenix Rising.

Stepping Stones is a monthly drop-in group for children ages 6 to 14. By meeting together, children learn that they are not alone grieving the loss of a love. Through facilitated activities they also learn more about grief. A parent's group meets at the same time.

Camp Nabi and Phoenix Rising brings grieving children and teens together to explore grief and share their stories by participating in facilitated groups, team initiative course and fun camp activities. Chesapeake Life Center has been providing this support to the community for 20 years and many of our big buddies come back year after year. This camp is generally held in August and there is limited space, so please call to receive an application.

Our counseling services are offered to families of Hospice of the Chesapeake patients at no charge for 13 months after the death. We do provide services to the community based on a sliding scale.

Chesapeake Life Center Staff is passionate about our role in providing grief support and services to the community and families. If you have a question or think you may need professional support please do not hesitate to call the phone number listed. We have programs in Anne Arundel and Prince George's county.