



Lauren Gaspar, LCSW

Licensed Clinical Social Worker

4131 Spicewood Springs Road

Suite F1

Austin, TX 78759

512.296.7258

Children's Grief Issues **(summarized from the teachings of Alan Wolfelt)**

It is important to be aware of the circumstances surrounding a death of a loved one. Was the death anticipated, preventable, or violent? The circumstances of a death impact a child's grief and how they mourn.

Anticipated Death

An anticipated death, such as one caused by chronic illness, provides the opportunity for an adult to help a child prepare for the death of a loved one and to say good-bye. To be included in the process instead of excluded. A child can know that a loved one is very, very, very, very ill, and that he or she could die, without taking away hope.

Many times children are excluded from anticipatory grief because the adults want to "protect" them from the pain. Then if a death occurs it may be anticipated for the adults but for the child it feels like a sudden death. This is not being protective of the child but complicating their mourning.

Children who are allowed to participate in anticipatory grief will feel they were included and allowed to be part of their family's experiences. Although they were prepared they will still be in a lot of pain after the death and need to mourn in their own way and own time.

Sudden Death

Sudden death does not give children the opportunity to emotionally prepare for the loss of a loved one. Children often feel numb and are in shock for weeks, maybe even months. The suddenness makes it more difficult to acknowledge the reality of the loss. The more sudden the death, the more likely the child is to appear to push the pain away and mourn in small doses and then push the pain away again. Many bereaved children appear to respond with a lack of feelings. This is how children protect themselves from the painful reality of the death of a loved one. You may not see as much outward mourning, especially after a sudden death, as you would expect. A child whose mother has just died may want to go outside to her swing set. Children cope with the painful loss of a loved one by grieving sporadically, in small doses taking in as much reality as they can and then leaving it.

Guilt

It is very common for children and adults to blame themselves when someone they loved has died. Magical thinking is the belief that thinking about something can make it happen. If a child, for example, wishes her baby brother would leave her family and go back to the hospital, and then the baby dies, the child believes it was his fault. He will blame himself and feel guilty for thinking about his brother leaving the family. Often a child feels responsible for a death but says nothing about his or her feelings. It is important that we are aware of magical thinking and listen carefully to what a child is telling us. He may feel he was “bad” because he didn’t do what his father told him to do. When his father dies in a car accident, he believes it was because he didn’t listen. If a child is saying, “I wish I could have.....”, “If only.....”, or “Why didn’t I.....” they may be revealing their guilt. They feel if they would have done something differently their loved one would not have died. They think they have caused the death. A young child may feel that he can also bring back the person who died of only now he is “good”. A guilty child may feel helpless and worthless and may feel he is a “bad” person.

A child often feels survivor-guilt when a loved one dies. If she sees her parents in tremendous pain after her brother died she may think it would have been better if she had died. The child may not realize that if she had died the parent would be experiencing the same pain and grief.

A child may also feel guilty when she begins to “go on” and feel happy again. She may think she is being disloyal to her loved one who died. It’s important to help children explore those feelings. It’s important to remember that going on does not mean forgetting or loving the person any less.

We need to provide children with the opportunities to talk and play out the circumstances of the death. Reinforce to them that death is not a punishment. Their loved one did not do anything wrong (unless of course this is not true). Help them to understand that angry thoughts about a person do not cause a person to die.

Fear

Grieving children often feel afraid, especially when the reality sets in that their loved one is not coming back. They may have questions such as, “If mommy died, can daddy die too?” Their fear is “Who will take care of me?” Adults must reassure the child that she is loved and will always be cared for. They may also be afraid of their own death. They may be afraid when they are ill or have a pain. Again, children need reassurance from the loving adults in their lives.

Children may be fearful of loving again because the pain of grief is so intense. They may think that if they don’t love so much they will never hurt like this again. We need to help children understand and accept these feelings. Help them understand that giving and receiving love are the greatest gifts of love.

Traumatic or Violent Death

Grieving a sudden traumatic death is always more complex. “Confusion, disorganization, fear, vulnerability, guilt, or anger are just a few of the emotions survivors may feel” (Wolfelt). The intensity of feelings and emotions may appear overwhelming. A child may feel intense anger after a traumatic or violent death. The sense of injustice turns anger into rage. Only through expressing the anger will it begin to lose some of its power. All these feelings must be expressed, not repressed, if there is to be healthy mourning. There may also be feelings of anxiety, panic and fear because the world does not feel safe anymore. The child feels more vulnerable and questions his own mortality and safety in the world. We must help children mourn and begin to trust in the world again.

The question “Why” is common after a traumatic death. Why did something like this happen? Bereaved children need a safe place to explore their feelings through talking, playing and creating, about the unanswerable “Why” question.

Anger

Anger is a common and normal expression of grief. We must help children find healthy ways to express anger. Only with the expression of anger will the anger begin to lose some of its power. Children must know that they cannot hurt themselves, others, or destroy property. We must help them find their own unique ways of expressing their anger. Children want things to be the way they were before the death occurred. Anger is a natural response to a relationship that has been lost.

Children who are not allowed to express their anger may turn their angry feelings inward. This can lead to depression, low self-esteem, physical symptoms and chronic feelings of guilt.

We adults need to tolerate and validate non-judgmentally their anger. Remember the underlying feelings of pain, helplessness, frustration, hurt and fear. We need to support children at this difficult time of mourning.