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Chapter One

Facts About Children and Grief

The National Center for Health Statistics in a recent survey states that one in every seven children loses someone close to them by death before the age of ten. This means literally thousands of young children experience the expected or unexpected death of parents, siblings, grandparents or other loved ones. In addition to those who experience the death of a sibling or parent, there are countless friends, classmates and relatives of these children who encounter grief for the first time in their young lives. All too often these children are the “forgotten grievers” and are expected to simply get on with life.

Special Challenges

Young children generally face more challenges than adults in understanding and grieving a loss. In addition to feeling sad, children may feel shock, anger, confusion, guilt, fright and insecurity. In contrast to adults, children face these challenges without the benefit of life experiences and emotional maturity to deal with these feelings.

Bouncing In and Out of Grief

In one of my many experiences as an aftercare consultant for a funeral home caring for families of the deceased, a young child (about 5 years old) came to the visitation for his deceased grandfather. After he had a healthy cry, he went to the other end of the emotional spectrum. He was told that he and his family were going to McDonald’s® for dinner, before the evening visiting hour at the funeral home. The young boy was elated that he was going to get a “Happy Meal” at McDonald’s® and he was not shy about telling visitors where he was going for dinner. This is very normal behavior for a young child. Children usually bounce in and out of grief, crying one moment and laughing the next. This young boy had another healthy cry just before leaving the funeral home to go to McDonald’s®. This is very confusing for children because they don’t understand why they bounce in and out of grief so



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quickly. It is also confusing for most adults in trying to understand the child's emotional reactions and, therefore, the needs of the grieving child.

Behavior

Adults, because of their established vocabulary, can usually connect words with feelings. Children may be too young to connect words with feelings. Thus, the way children can best express themselves is through their behavior. One example is they may become aggressive or hurt themselves as a way of relieving pain they can't express. Others, as a result of fear, may become withdrawn, unwilling to share thoughts and feelings, harboring their fears inside.

Play

In 1988, I was a Physical Education teacher in an elementary school. A close friend of mine for 16 years was one of the 5th grade teachers. My friend was killed in a car accident on a Friday evening in February. I was the replacement teacher in his classroom the following Monday morning. This was an experience in life you would never want to sign up for. However, after going through this difficulty, I learned a great deal about helping grieving children I would not have learned by doing research. The children taught me more than I could have ever imagined. While in this circumstance, my approach toward the children was to express how I was feeling about the tragedy to legitimize their feelings. As a result, the children saw me as more than their teacher—they saw me as a human being also mourning this loss along with them. They also taught me that *grief shared is grief diminished*. In sharing our grief, we encouraged each other. However, this may not always be the best approach. The children may need someone to provide a high degree of stability at this time. Sharing how you are impacted by the tragedy may hinder efforts to provide stability. The adult in charge must make this decision.

That particular Monday morning, the playground supervisors were very upset when they discovered a group of first grade students in our school were acting out during play how they perceived this tragedy had occurred. Experts agree that this is normal and healthy behavior if the children choose to do this on their own, without any prompting from adults. This type of play usually includes their feelings and understanding of the tragedy. In instances where there is a high degree of volatility or hysteria, I highly recommend that if children indicate that they do want to act out what happened, they do so under the supervision of a professional.

Behavior and play become one of the few outlets children have when they lack life experiences in the understanding of a tragedy and how it fits into everyday life. Remember, as stated before, they usually do not have a vocabulary to connect words and feelings. With this in mind, children need physical comfort, sympathy, compassion and an opportunity to express themselves in their own way far more than they need advice. I will expand more on this idea in the upcoming chapters.

Age Considerations

Before I discuss specific age considerations of the child, I wish to express the fact that grief is a unique experience to all individuals, including children. I do not believe in the theory that grieving children of a certain age group grieve in a certain way. I believe that each child will, in some phase of the grief journey, respond in an atypical and unique manner. However, there are times when a peer group's influence will impact children, causing their behaviors to fall into typical patterns. Although we do find some general typical grief responses relative to age, caring adults must afford the opportunity to the grieving child to teach us what grief is like for him.

Common Grief Responses and Patterns

Please bear in mind that while I am attempting to list typical patterns, the uniqueness with which people experience grief may not show up on my lists.

Baby to Age Two – Increased crying, thumb sucking, fussier, sleep more or less, eat more or less.

Preschoolers - ages 3 to 6 – May be frightened and may not understand their feelings. They usually cannot verbalize what is going on inside them. They may ask some questions about the death over and over again. They also may act out the death through play. Regression to thumb sucking, losing potty training and baby talk are common. They usually don't understand the permanence of death.

Ages 6 to 9 – Many experts state that children in this age group primarily express their grief through play. Many may appear to misbehave or act in such a way that adults perceive their actions as misbehavior. This may occur because of children's confusion over how to handle their grief feelings and, in many cases, their actions may not really constitute misbehavior at all. Their questions may revolve around curiosity about the decomposition of the body and the biological process of death. They also may believe the person may be alive in the grave. The permanence of death is still very difficult to comprehend.

Ages 9 to 12 – At this age children are developing a better understanding of death. They are usually ready for more information or answers to these questions:

- Why did the death happen?
- What is and what happens at a funeral?
- What is the reason for a funeral?
- Will others they love die?
- What will happen to them if a parent or both parents die?

As caring adults, our role is to help children grieve. We need to support and educate them, not protect them from grief. We must realize that grief is the solution, not the problem. Unfortunately, the child must be allowed to feel his pain if he is going to heal. Rather than advice, the greater needs of the child are physical comfort, sympathy and compassion.

