THE GRIEF OF CHILDREN

Our own discomfort with the subject of death and grief leads us to believe that children do not understand death and that they are not affected by the death of a family member. This is not true. Children are affected by a death in the family no matter what their age. They react not only to the loss of that person, but to the changes in the behavior of the adults around them. To assume that children are not affected by the death and do not grieve is erroneous and may even be detrimental to the child's mental health in the long term. Because children do not have the appropriate knowledge and experience necessary to deal with the loss of a person significant in their lives it is up to the child's adult caretakers to help them.\

Until about 2 years of age, the child has only the concept of "here" or "not here." A child of this age will react to the behavior of those around her, rather than to the death. The infant senses that the mother (or other primary caregiver) is upset and she will react to that. More holding or coddling until the crisis of the death has passed may be needed for a child of this age.

A child of 3 to 5 sees death as temporary. She does not see that real changes occur at death or see the finality of it. She sees the dead person as being somewhere else, but still eating, sleeping or doing the things they did in life. She may think the person will come back. A common grief reaction among children of this age might be to regress into earlier childhood, and bed wetting or thumb sucking may return temporarily. You may also find that this age child will become clinging or tearful at your leaving, even if it is to be for a short period of time. This comes from the fear that you too, may leave her as did the one who died.

> Because a child of this age takes what we say literally, it essential that we make simple, but truthful statements to her about the death. Do not tell her that grandma "went to sleep", ("I could die if

I go to sleep."), or that "God wanted grandma" ("Does He want me too?"), or that you "lost" grandma ("If you lost her why can't you find her?"). A three to five year old will interpret a statement very differently from the way we do. Remember they do not have the experiences and knowledge to apply to statements as we do. They react to what is, not what is intended.

To get an idea of what a child of this age is experiencing, watch her at play. Many times you can get a clue to what she is thinking or feeling from her play behavior. For example: hitting a doll or throwing things could indicate anger. She could well be angry that grandma (dad, brother, etc.,) isn't there as he/she usually is for her. In an accepting way, try to help her to talk about what is bothering her. Answer any questions she may have in simple and direct ways; in language that she can understand.

From 6 to 10 a child generally shares our adult concept of death and can usually understand any explanation, but for them death is personified. They see death as a person or thing that "comes to get you". They could well feel that if death "got" their parent or grandparent, it could "get" them too. Do not discount this perception, but in accepting ways reassure them that this not true and that they are safe.

They may want to know details of the death and burial that to adults may seem gorey or morbid. Try to see it as it really is for them; a need to know facts, and do not brush them off with statements that make them feel guilty or "bad" for wanting to know what happened. Be as open with them as possible and answer any of their questions as clearly and honestly as you can. If you cannot discuss the details yourself, find another trusted adult to talk with the child.

Another aspect to be aware of when dealing with six to ten year olds is that they may feel that they caused the death by wishing it. It is typical of this age group to indulge in "Magical Thinking" which is the idea that thinking something can cause it to happen. For instance, most children, at one time or another will say, or think, "I wish he/she was dead." Then when it does, in fact happen, they may feel responsible. Also a child of this age may see the death as their punishment for being "bad". Be aware that most young children will feel some amount of guilt at the death of a family member. As their caregivers we need to help them see that the death was not their fault.

From about 11 or 12, a child conceives of death in a manner similar to that of an adult, but a complication for them is their battle for emotional growth and maturity, while at the same time needing the security of being a child. Their grief after the death of someone they love, especially if it is a sibling or a parent, may cause them to need the nurturence and dependence of being a small child again, but at the same time their drive for maturity may cause them to pull away from the very love and care they most need.

In this conflict some pre-adolescents and adolescents may exhibit self-destructive behavior, both as a way of proving to themselves that death doesn't threaten them, or because of the inability to cope with the pressure of their ambivalence.

The child's caregivers need to be aware of the emotional turmoil the adolescent is experiencing and be patient with it. This will not be easy to do. A teen can be hard to live with under the best of circumstances, but during the intensely emotional period of grief the whole situation is worsened. Also, while grieving, both the adolescent and the adults around her, frequently over react to situations which further intensifies the problem.

You may need to simply back off from the adolescent and respect her way of coping and her ability to work out her own problems. The most helpful thing you can do is to share your concerns for her conflicts and assure her of your confidence in her ability to cope. Stress your willingness to help her if she needs you.

Sometimes an adolescent's behavior may be quite out of bounds because of her inability to handle all the conflicts that are raging inside of her. This may be a time for added guidelines or rules of behavior (such as time limits to be home) that will keep the adolescent from too much freedom when they already have too many decisions to make. Written contracts can be helpful in doing this because of the likelihood of adult inconsistency that is so common during grief. Think of these rules and guidelines as the sides on a wide bridge that allows much freedom, but yet the rails keep the adolescent from falling off the sides.

Often times the adolescent will attempt to parent the parent (or other primary caregiver). This is admirable and demonstrates her concern and love for you, but I would suggest caution in allowing this to happen to too great a degree. I think it is dangerous for the adolescent. At a time when she is overburdened by her own emotional conflicts, she does not need this impossible task. Because she lacks the maturity to know better, she may believe she can accomplish what she cannot, that is, provide for the emotional needs of her parent and lessen his/her pain. In truth, no one can do this, but the adolescent may believe she can. This desire to assuage the parent's grief is doomed to failure, and the adolescent does not need this failure heaped on top of her already overburdened psyche. It is important to acknowledge to the adolescent that you know that she loves you and wants to take your pain away, but be careful of letting her take on this role.

Overall you can be most helpful to your grieving children by being as open to them as you can and allowing them to share their thoughts and feelings with you. Share yours with them. Be as honest as you can with their questions. Try to be as patient with them as possible. Understand that their behavior may reflect feelings that they may not be able to express. Be available to listen to them and reassure them that you are there to help them. Remind them that though you yourself are hurting right now, you love them as much or more than you ever did. Be quick to acknowledge the positive things they do for themselves and for the family. As with adults, low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness accompany a child's grief, and they need to be told over and over that they are good, and that you are glad you have them. Tell them that you know they are hurting.

The most important thing you can do for children is to let them see you grieve. Let them know that it is normal and healthy to grieve when you have lost someone you love dearly, that it is a sign of love that you hurt as you do. Reassure them that whatever they think or feel is normal and acceptable.

Grief is a complex phenomenon. There are no simple answers in helping children deal with grief. Each child will react differently, and many factors will play a part in how a child will react to a death in the family. Caring adults need to communicate to children that what they are feeling is okay and not something to hide and that grief is a natural expression of love for the person who has died.

Caring adults can guide children through this difficult time and help make the experience a valuable part of a child's personal growth and development.

Margaret H. Gerner, M.S.W

Suggested Reading:

TELLING A CHILD ABOUT DEATH, Edgar N. Jackson

TALKING ABOUT DEATH, A Dialogue Between Parent and Child, Earl Grollman

LEARNING TO SAY GOODBY, When a Parent Dies, Eda LeShan

BUTTERFLIES, GRANDPA AND ME,
Bruce Conley

DYING IS DIFFERENT, Phyllis Rash
Hughes

CHILDREN ARE NOT PAPERDOLLS,
Phyllis Rash Hughes

Margaret H. Gerner, MSW