

Helping Children Cope With Death

Washington State Employee Assistance Program

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The ways children learn to respond to mishaps or death early in life affects their reactions to future losses. When the death of a significant person in the life of a child does occur, if we as adults take the time to share feelings, we teach that an emotional response like grief is normal and appropriate. By answering questions honestly and otherwise acknowledging children's experiences and concerns about death, we help them, as well as ourselves, to begin to heal.

Be direct, simple, and honest. Explain truthfully what has happened.

Encourage the child to express feelings openly. Crying is normal and helpful.

Accept the emotions and reactions the child expresses. Do not tell the child how he or she should or should not feel. Some children will not show any feelings, and may seem not to care – they may need time alone to think.

Offer warmth and physical presence and affection. Be aware of children's needs to maintain their own space while sorting out what may be a lot of confusing information and feelings.

Share your feelings with the child. Allow the child to comfort you.

Be patient. Know that children often need to hear "the story" and to ask the same questions again and again.

Reassure the child that death is not contagious. The death of one person does not mean the child or other loved ones will soon die.

Maintain order, stability, and security in the child's life. Routines are important to children. Sometimes a friend close to a child can assist with keeping daily activities going if you cannot. Some children, especially those old enough to understand circumstances, may choose to not follow routines.

Listen to what the child is telling or asking you. Respond according to the child's need.

Allow the child to make some decisions about participation in family rituals; i.e., visitation, the funeral, socializing after the funeral. Be sure to explain in advance what will happen.

If you feel unable to answer your child's questions or concerns, or feel your child needs more assistance for coping than you can give, professional counselors specializing in children's experiences of grief and loss are a good resource. The Employee Assistance Program can help to locate good therapists.