

Resource Article

Help for Grieving Children and Teens

Carey Sturgeon

When we have losses in our lives, we experience grief. These losses can be death, illness, injury, abuse, natural disasters, divorce, or even moving to a new home. As people grieve, they go through stages of grief, starting with denial. After denial, they move through the stages of bargaining, guilt, fear, anger, isolation, confusion, depression and sadness, and, finally, acceptance. Children and teens may not go through all of these stages. They may complete the stages in a different order, or they may go through 1 or 2 stages several times. Grief experiences have some similarities. But each child and teen will experience grief in a unique way, as grief is always extremely personal.

Burst of Grief

Many children cannot endure long periods of intense sadness. They are not emotionally mature enough. Therefore, they experience their grief and sadness in bursts that are often unpredictable. You can never tell when the grief will come. For example, a child appears fine and then suddenly he is sobbing. Such “sad attacks” happen when the child is reminded of the loss. That reminder can be something someone says, something the child remembers, or even something he smells. This may also happen with teens, particularly those who are at risk, as often their emotions have not developed as expected. They may be less mature emotionally because of traumas they have faced.

Typical and Not Typical Symptoms

There are some typical temporary symptoms of children and teens who experience loss:

Loss of appetite	Restless sleep
Headaches	Stomachaches
Shock	Irritability
Apathy	Poor concentration
Poor school performance	

However, there are some symptoms that are not typical. Children and teens who develop these symptoms may need professional help. They include:

An eating disorder	Nightmares
Physical aggression	A refusal to form new attachments
Anxiety	Preoccupation with further loss
Constant fear of catastrophe	Isolation
Withdrawal	Clinical depression
Total denial of the loss event	

What Grieving Children and Teens Need

Even though children and teens may grieve differently than adults do, they are not too young to feel pain. They may worry about what will happen to them and fear being abandoned. They may want to talk about the loss but do not know how to start. They may feel less upset when someone explains how the person died. It is good to explain to them your culture's death rituals. Children and teens need time to grieve. As they grow, important events, such as holidays or marriage, may trigger the grieving process again.

Well-meaning adults sometimes make the grieving process more difficult for young people. They try to protect children and teens by not sharing the details of the death or not allowing them to take part in the culture's death rituals. It is helpful to share age-appropriate facts about the death, even a murder or suicide. Children and teens should be invited to take part in death rituals, and their questions should be answered.

What Not to Do

Sometimes adults tell children and teens to be strong or not to feel so sad. When this happens, these children or teens may learn to distrust or hide their feelings. They may be ashamed of their feelings. This hinders their healing and stunts their emotional development. Adults may try to ease young people's pain by using phrases that have no real meaning to the child or teen, such as "At least she is not suffering now," or "He is in a better place." Phrases like this make the pain seem unimportant and make the child or teen feel that he should not feel any grief.

When children or teens experience loss, often they initially want others to know how badly they feel and to join them in their pain. This prepares them to begin the long journey of healing.

Steps to Help a Grieving Child or Teen

How do you help a grieving child or teen to heal? First, develop a good relationship with him.

Second, start conversations about the loss. Do this by using open-ended questions to encourage conversation. The child or teen may not be ready to talk for some time. Be patient. It is likely that she does want to talk about the loss.

Third, when the child or teen finally speaks about the loss, listen compassionately. You should not pass judgment or try to find out more facts about the situation. You are not there to fix the situation or advise him. Simply empathize with the young person and let him know that his feelings are okay. He may need to tell his story about the loss many times.

Fourth, encourage the young person and reassure her that she can survive this crisis. A child or teen may be frightened and overwhelmed by her feelings. She needs to know that her experience is normal. She needs to know that she can make it through the grieving process and heal.

Fifth, share some coping strategies or healing rituals with the child or teen. He can write a letter to the person who died or plant a tree or flowers as a memorial to that person. Tell him that it is acceptable for him to have fun and be happy.

Sixth, be prepared for the child to express thoughts of guilt and fear from time to time. You will be ready to comfort and reassure him using your understanding of loss and the grieving process.