

# CHILDREN AND DEATH

**C.H.I.L.D.** A Simple Guide to Helping Children Handle Grief

## **C - CONSIDER**

When you consider the effects of grief on children, remember first that grief like death has no respect for age.

The experience of grief is not based on our ability to "understand" but on our ability to "feel". We grieve because we have loved and any child, who is old enough to love, is old enough to feel grief when someone dies.

As youth confers no immunity from grief, so age confers no complete understanding of it. In the face of death, we are all "as children". Thus explaining death to children begins when we dare to consider our own feelings and face ourselves in the real light of our grieving experience.

## **H - HONESTY**

When talking about death with children, "Honesty is the only policy".

Because death is an uncomfortable subject, we try to "spare the children" (and ourselves) by not talking about it. We avoid words like "die" and "dead" and say "passed away" or "expired". But half-truths and euphemisms intended to "ease the pain", only make it worse when the child learns he has been told a lie. In times of crisis, children desperately need someone they can trust to give honest answers in simple language.

If you are worried about having all the "answers", take heart - you never will. Just remember when you don't have answers, have the courage to say "I don't know". Then join your children in finding the facts in *their own way*. You will give them something better than answers; you will give them the guidance and courage to seek the truth.

## **I - INVOLVE**

To "involve" children, means to provide a variety of ways to discover the realities of death and express the emotions of grief.

Like the atomic explosion that results when the centre or nucleus of an atom is split, the experience of death at the centre of our lives unleashes enormous energies. As we have learned to harness atomic power in our environment, so too we can harness the explosive energies of grief in our lives.

The power of grief lies largely in its pressurized condition. It makes us restless yet exhausted, hypersensitive yet numb. While tears are our most natural outlet, you can also help children by providing opportunities for active creative play. Clay, paper, crayons and puppets are just a few useful toys in helping the very young express their feelings. Even when you cannot agree with them, try to help the young child talk about his play and let him know you accept the validity of his feelings.

With the release of pressure, comes the realization of pain; the desire for escape, explanation and perhaps revenge. Understanding the importance of involvement in the funeral can help you face the loss, gain understanding and focus the energies of revenge on rebuilding.

The funeral is composed of many helpful rituals you may never have considered. For instance the simple act of viewing the body can help children understand the physical truth about death in a way that words alone cannot explain. If you hesitate to expose your children to this custom, remember that what they imagine about death through TV fantasies would frighten most adults!

For younger children, involvement may mean placing a small bouquet, a photograph, a coloured picture or prized possession into the coffin to say "goodbye". Simply printing their own name in an attendance book, helps to say "I was here", "I'm important too!"

For teens, presenting a brief eulogy or a poem at the funeral, placing a personal letter in the coffin, being an acolyte, reader or coffin/pass bearer or any number of other creative acts of involvement can be very constructive rituals.

A child learns to grieve as he learns to love – one step at a time. For this reason, bringing children to a funeral before a crisis occurs is good education. Gradually then, they have an opportunity to assimilate the experience of sharing sorrow. Regardless, when tragedy strikes, children need to be involved to share the experience with you.

## **L - LISTEN**

If we would relate to the grief of children at any age, we must learn to "hear" the whole message of their words and behaviour.

When a child asks "why did he die?" our best response may be another question; one that clarifies "our" understanding of "his" question. A statement such as, "I've wondered about that myself, and I'm not sure I have the whole answer – what do you think?" acknowledges the validity of the child's question and gives him permission to share what he really thinks. When we respond in turn, we must take care that our words and actions are consistent with what we mean to say. It requires some practice, but improving the way we listen and respond to each other pays valuable dividends in understanding and gives the child confidence in his search for meaning.

## **D - DO IT OVER AND OVER**

This last letter reminds us that the healing of grief is a painfully slow process of repetition.

For children as well as adults the general cycles of grief: shock and numbness, pain and confusion, exhausted depression and renewed strength, continue in random order until each has been successfully worked through. Typically, the process of healing is interrupted by other changes in life and our grieving may lie dormant for a time. Though months or even years intervene, the unfinished work of grieving often returns in different forms for unexplained reasons. When it does, we are wise to accept it as one of the belated "gifts of grief". For "good grief" like happiness itself, is not a point of arrival, but rather a mode of travel. That, perhaps, is the silver lining that the "child" in all of us must learn to understand about grief.

***Reprinted with the permission of the author for the exclusive use of The Compassionate Friends, South Africa.***

***Brochure sponsored by Goodall & Williams; Doves; Saffas; Jones & Rice***

**Copyright 1983 B.H. CONLEY**