

Supporting children through grief

Grief can be a difficult for time, especially when adults are trying to juggle their own emotions and support children through grief and loss simultaneously. Making matters worse, grief is not a process that can be rushed or swept under the carpet. It is an event which can and often does trigger strong emotional reactions, ones which can disrupt family life. Being able to understand the grieving process for children can help make rough waters feel smoother and allow adults to feel as though they can be as supportive as possible. Therefore, the purpose of this article is two-fold. Firstly to provide insight into what the grieving process might look like for children and secondly to provide some strategies to support children in these times.

What is grief?

Grief is defined by the loss of something or someone. In the event of loss strong emotional reactions trigger behaviours that are not typically present, for example, anger, numbness, withdrawal and repeated episodes of sadness. Despite cultural background, grief touches all humans, although the reactions to grief can vary depending on beliefs and the grieving process undertaken by families and/or communities.

Grief is not necessarily defined by the loss of a loved one. Instead, other things can trigger grief and loss reactions, for example, the loss of a pet, a change of schools or home, the loss of a parent (in situations of divorce), friendship rifts, the birth of a new sibling, or the loss of a toy or activity. This list is not exhaustive. Regardless of the apparent significance of a loss, children can react in ways that may seem disproportionate to the actual loss. Nevertheless, children's grief reactions are real and a grieving process must be undertaken in order for them to find acceptance and move on.

Typical signs of grief

Children can have many adverse reactions when going through the grieving process. Typically grief brings with it five stages, although psychological theories recognise additional stages. To keep things simple this article will touch on the five original stages identified by Kubler-Ross.

In the first stage of grief children will deny the loss. Denying the loss will be apparent when the child refuses to listen to or accept the loss as having happened. Supporting children through this initial stage may be difficult as an adult's natural default is to try to fix and reason with children to make them see the reality of a situation. Despite best efforts and intentions children will rarely be in a state of wanting to listen. Instead silence, cuddles, acknowledgements and answering questions can be some of the best help offered in these times.

The second stage of the grief cycle talks about anger. When an individual accepts the loss as reality children can become very angry at the world and everyone in it. Even the most placid child can be observed having big tantrums and throwing things in these moments. While there is an acceptance that a child's reactions are a normal part of grieving, children need

consistency in their world, meaning if they were never allowed to throw or hit things prior to their loss, the rules remain the same. Acknowledging their anger and/or finding/offering them alternatives to vent their frustrations (i.e. hitting a pillow) can provide the kind of support children need in these times.

The third stage of grief transports the child to the bargaining stage. Often people traversing this stage can be seen and heard trying to bargain with others, including higher powers such as their religious God. Children, especially younger children, who have the proclivity of believing they may have been a cause of a loss (i.e. parents separating) need to be reassured that the things that happened are not their fault, even though they might feel the effects of them. In instances where children make promises, for example, promising to be good if the person or object comes back to them, adults can best support them by validating what they are saying and then adding a comment that cements the reality of the situation, for example, "You really wish that if you were good for the rest of time it would bring back Rover, even though Rover can't come back to us".

The fourth stage of the grief and loss cycle is depression. Hostility and helpless feelings towards the situation can lead to situational depression and ongoing feelings of sadness. It can be tempting to try to divert the child's attention elsewhere, however, this is not always the strategy needed. Just sitting with the child, cuddling them and parroting to them what is happening to them, i.e. "You feel so sad, and sadness makes you want to just sit here and do nothing", can help a child understand their feelings and their reactions to them. Silences and/or talking to children about the way the adult is feeling about the same situation can also help to normalise the grieving process. Also, stating out loud the strategies being used by the adult to overcome their own sadness can be the perfect way to plant seeds in children's minds relating to how they might be able to get through the tougher times.

The final stage of this cycle is acceptance. The first stage of acceptance is adjusting to the change, finding a place in one's heart for their sadness and the loss of whatever it is/was. Learning how to cope with and highlighting the moments and things children are doing when they are not sad helps to accentuate their progression towards accepting new ways of being. After adjusting to the changes of circumstance children will be better equipped to accept the loss and even talk about it more freely. Children, despite reaching this stage, may, like all people, regress at different times and revisit earlier stages of the cycle. When acceptance has been achieved, however, the child's ability to shift between the stages more quickly will be evident, for example, they may feel a sudden sadness, cry, and, after getting a cuddle and asking a few questions move off and play, demonstrating their ability to re-achieve a stage of acceptance.

While the above describes the stages of grief for children, the stages are the same for adults too. Although these stages are described in a linear process it is important to note that people will not necessarily travel through these stages in order. Some stages can be missed

altogether while in other instances some people will go backwards and forwards between the different stages in no apparent order.

When adults focus on making sure that children are coping they also need to ensure they care for themselves equally. Seeking support from friends, family members or professionals are but a few options to lessen the burden of the heavy heart carried around by many dealing with grief.

Honesty is the best policy

When faced with the reality of a loss adults can sometimes question how and if they should inform children. Research suggests that children who are exposed to and experience loss develop greater resilience towards other losses as they age. As such, being as honest as possible with the child is suggested. Keeping the conversation child-friendly and appropriate is always needed. Concrete words that determine the definitive nature of the loss is also recommended. It is much more difficult to accept a loss if there is still the possibility in one's mind that the situation could be reversed, for example, if a child is told their pet has gone to sleep, children will reason that everyone and everything wakes up eventually.

Other behaviours that may be observed

Young children have not yet gained the skills to understand permanency. As such, they are likely to ask questions that suggest they still think it is possible to see whoever or whatever was lost. Being prepared for such occurrences can help adults find the patience and understanding needed to answer the same questions more than once.

Children have no way of understanding death. As a result, they may try to make sense of it in other ways, for example in their play. Allowing children to role play their thoughts can be a powerful tool and one that helps elevate them towards healing.

Alternatively children may try to make sense of their loss in subconscious ways, for example, in their dreams. Dreams can be trickier to deal with as there is little adults can do to curb their presence. When dreams become problematic, talking to the child in honest ways about how their brain is trying to make sense of their sadness can help. Alternatively children can draw pictures of their dreams and then talk about them. Adults talking to children in these instances should refrain from asking questions, instead showing an interest and prompting the child to talk about their drawing, for example, "I see you've drawn something over here". Prompting conversations develops a safe space where children can talk if they wish or simply sit in silence and reflect on their work. Either way they will be navigating the grief and loss process, meaning that they are moving, in their own way, towards acceptance.

Children may become easily distracting when grieving. Their concentration span during these times can make it seem like something else may be going on. Quite often the truth of the matter is that their head is full of emotions and trying to sort through and manage them is

taking up a lot of energy. Giving children simple, gentle reminders about staying on task is one way to support them in these moments.

Children may develop a fear of further loss, suddenly worrying about losing something or someone else. Reassurance in the form of acknowledgements is often one of the most effective tools to help quell a child's fears. Promising them that nothing else bad will happen is not necessarily the best option as there is no assurances that another loss will not happen. Stating their fears in plain, simple terms, for example, "You're worried it might happen again," allows children to sit in the uncomfortable space their emotions are creating, thus allowing them to work through their feelings and return to a more natural state of being, for example, playing. Giving them time and cuddles without trying to talk them through the situation or feelings can never be underestimated.

Children do not naturally make connections between emotions and physical sensations. As such, they may complain about having a headache or feeling sick. Helping children to identify and connect their feelings and bodily sensations can help them to process what is happening for them. Comments such as stating the way they are feeling and the bodily reaction they are having is one way to start building their understanding.

Checking in

It can be tempting to want to check in with children to see how they are travelling. While it is not taboo to do so it is important to make sure that children's thoughts are not dragged into a grieving state unnecessarily. Part of overcoming a grieving state is to participate in typical activities. As such, when children are playing and otherwise acting in ways that suggest they are coping well, allow them the space to simply be and enjoy their grief-free moments. Naturally, if adults can see a child has entered back into one of the grieving stages support can be offered.

Role modelling

Frequently adults experience grief and loss at the same time as children. When adults use and make their own reactions and healing strategies known to children they can role model ways to overcome the discomfort grief can create. Crying is a natural strategy the body creates for us when grieving. As such, crying in front of children lets them know it is normal and alright to cry. Also, articulating to children the actions taken by an adult to keep their days and routines going help children to identify that even when we feel like letting the world carry on without us, we still need to participate in it.

Making things as normal as possible

Because grief can create a range of reactions and responses it can be easy to justify children's poor behaviour and make allowances for it. Instances where children's worlds are no longer as they were means they will find security in their routines and rules. When allowances are

made and children are permitted to push boundaries, greater confusion and more potent emotional responses can ensue.

The gist of grief and how to cope with it

Grief is an emotionally turbulent time. It can be triggered by the loss of someone or something. Being able to identify the grieving stages and utilise strategies to support children's navigation of grief can help children accept and move on from their loss. Grieving is a process experienced by all human beings, although culture and social customs affect the way the grieving process is undertaken. Identified by Kubler-Ross, the typical stages of grief include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. As a child moves through and between these stages they will experience a range of different emotions and behave in ways that may not fit their usual repertoire. Supporting children in certain ways, for example, allowing them time, listening to them, role modelling, answering questions as honestly as possible, acknowledging their feelings and thoughts, and keeping their lives, routines and rules as consistent as possible can support children to find acceptance and overcome their loss.

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