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Helping Children Cope With Grief

By Theresa V. Wilson, M.Ed.

Helping Children Cope With Grief by Theresa V. Wilson, M.Ed.

Age is not a prerequisite to grief. Not unlike their parents, child must be allowed to experience the stages of grief. Denial of opportunity to "release" feelings, participate in family loss, and share in recovery can be very damaging to the health and well being of the child.

You do not have to be a psychologist or therapist to understand and use basic tools to address the needs of a grieving child. It does require recognition that "kids are people too," and acceptance that their process of mending is no different than adults. Whether death or divorce, the stages of a child's emotional recuperating are very similar to adults, and must be fully addressed by the parents in order to reap positive results.

Never assume you know what your child may be thinking or feeling. Even in the closest relationships, he or she will keep their most intimate feelings as they assess, for themselves, the impact of the emotional trauma and related environment issues that have been forced upon them.

There are general stages of grief manifested in behaviors, attitudes and changes similar to the following:

Initial Shock which can be manifested in periods of withdrawal and silence or through wild behavior and disobedience;

Emotional Release which is a stage of becoming more aware of their loss and reacting with dramatic release of various emotions including crying without cause, striking siblings or becoming easily provoked. Some youth may exhibit a variety of disruptive behaviors in school in addition to anti-social responses at home;

Physical Symptoms include sleepless nights, nightmares, abnormal eating habits and digestive problems; and finally Guilt Feelings exhibited by blaming others for what they feel they have done to create the situation.

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The road to recovery for youth may require that adults take a proactive role. There are several activities parents can use to create an atmosphere of comfort and support. These activities also encourage a closer communication between parent and child that moves far beyond the immediate crisis.

Ø Encourage your child to prepare a picture album of favorite activities they experienced with the loved one. This may include family outings, birthday celebrations, or special events and holidays.

Ø Encourage the child to write a story or "diary of events" about the positive experiences they remember when the loved one was with them (purchase a colorful diary or notebook and include a "special pen" the child can use for this activity. Make this a personal experience for them that no one else can share. Do not ask to read their diary entries or short stories. Let them offer to share when they are

ready. If the child is unsure how to begin, suggest they develop a summary around the picture album.

Ø Encourage the child to draw pictures of pleasant memories. Purchase a combination of crayons, paint and brushes. Make the project unique to them. Keep it easy and convenient to begin by making it clear supplies will be available as they find the need for them. The key here is to make sure their interest in expressing themselves is not dampened by the lack of supplies.

The key ingredient is your openness to explore whatever creative ideas are necessary to help your child move through the grief process and not become stagnate in any one phase. In helping children cope with the loss of someone they love keep the following in mind:

q Be honest and direct and truthful in explaining what happened. Creating stories to "protect" feelings may make the grief process more difficult in the long run.

q Allow and encourage children to express their feelings openly. Let them know that crying is normal, helpful and acceptable. Don't put time limits on this process. Each child is unique and will move along at a pace most comfortable to him. Don't compare or contrast one child from another and categorize strength or weaknesses. Help them know you accept their feelings, support positive choices and will guide them through negative experiences along the way.

q Accept individual emotions and reactions and don't tell the child what he or she should or should not feel.

q Listen to what the child is saying then focus on responding to the child's needs. Avoid putting words in their mouth or thoughts in their head. Become a good listener.

q Be a strong foundation, maintaining as much stability in the child's life as you can.

q Encourage the child to be part of some of the decisions the family will make during the death planning process. Take time to explain the process and procedures and always ask them how they feel. Don't ban them from discussions.

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q Be patient, recognizing that children may need to hear what happened again and again and will ask the same questions over and over. Not unlike the learning curve in school, repetition is helpful to reinforcing the meaning of an end of life process.

Grieving is an individual wilderness experience that is not exclusive to adults. Shock, anger, denial, guilt and behavior changes are human responses. Children need adults to help them connect to their resources, maintain a positive attitude, and walk in faith believing that they will heal and get through it. Knowing that someone cares will help make their "wilderness" journey easier to bear. You will both be victorious if you take a step back from your own pain and remember that children grieve too.

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Theresa V. Wilson, M.Ed. is a freelance writer and owner of a home based business dedicated to providing products and resources for grieving families and caregivers facing health recovery and crisis related issues. Her Grief and Health support sites are www.meetingtheneeds.org and www.renewingyourhealth.org

Helping Parents Cope with Children's Disabilities

By News Canada

(NC)–Parents of children with disabilities face extra demands on their time, energy and resources. Most cope well, despite the fact that increased stress takes a physical and emotional toll. Why do some parents cope better than others? Dr. Peter Rosenbaum, Dr. Parminder Raina and their team at McMaster University are studying 650 parents of children with varying degrees of cerebral palsy to determine how a wide range of factors in the parents, the child, the family and the social environment influence parents' well-being and health. This research should help health professionals working with families in such situations.

Their research is being funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). CIHR is Canada's preeminent health research catalyst and is funded by the government of Canada. An exciting new concept, CIHR is modernizing and transforming the health research enterprise in Canada.

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