

Grief Myths, Do's, and Don'ts

10 Basic Myths of Grief

1. Grief and mourning are the same experience.
2. Adults can instantly give explanations to children about death and spirituality.
3. The experience of grief and mourning has orderly stages.
4. The grief of adults does not impact on the bereaved child.
5. Adults should avoid topics that cause a child to cry.
6. An active, playing child is not a grieving child.
7. Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.
8. Parents, educators, and clergy are always prepared and qualified to give explanations and clarifications regarding loss and grief.
9. Children need to "get over" their grief and move on.
10. Children are better off not attending funerals.

Linda Goldman, *Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children* 2nd Edition, 2000 Taylor & Francis

Helping Children Through Grief

Do:

1. Use reflective listening and establish eye contact.
2. TELL THE TRUTH. If you don't know the answer, it is ok.
3. Tell the child the EXACT cause of death when you find out. And explain what it means. Some younger children may not know what a "massive heart attack" is.
4. Use third person language in talking to children. It's less threatening to them. Say, "Many children feel....", Instead of "Do YOU feel?"
5. Maintain structure, rules, limits, and routines as much as possible. It provides security.
6. Hold and Hug. (If that is what they want).
7. Expect that your own grief issues will come to the surface. Take time for yourself and deal with those feelings as needed.
8. Allow children to see your feelings. This is how they learn how to address their own feelings. Be a good role model. Cry in front of the child. It gives them permission to feel normal about their own tears.
9. Talk to children about the funeral. Let them attend the funeral or memorial service. If they have never been to one, and plan to attend, let them know what to expect.
10. Recognize that everyone expresses grief differently. Children may do so in many different ways, which are often expressed more in their behavior than their words (e.g. quiet and thoughtful, act out death in play, become aggressive, or become hyper and restless).

11. Allow children to select the play activities they need to work through their grief. Children's grief comes out in their play. Their grief will also resurface from time to time, even long after the loss.
12. Encourage the child to "talk" about his or her feelings through art, poetry, or letters.
13. Allow the child to help with something or give them something to do (e.g. put a memory book together, choose pictures for memorial service, help with a meal or pick out a card for the bereaved family). It will help combat his or her feelings of helplessness.

Don't:

1. Underestimate the child's grief (see Developmental Stages of Grief)
2. Associate tears with grief. Some children cry, some do not. Both may be equally affected.
3. Be afraid of losing control or crying in front of the child. Tears give the child permission to be real too.
4. Be afraid to initiate conversations about the death. If a child does not want to talk, they will let you know. But it is important to give them the opportunity and the chance.
5. Try to protect the child from pain and loss. You are not able to shelter a child from death or loss, but you can help them learn how to respond to such circumstances.
6. Worry about saying the "right words". Some children may simply need you to listen without saying anything.
7. Push the child to "talk about it". Everyone expresses grief and deals with it very differently. A child will tell us how he or she feels in the way he or she is able, usually through behaviors.
8. Be overly simplistic about the death. Death is not something to brush by or try and ignore. Searching for meaning and dealing with our own mortality makes us focus on how we use our life and points to our need for Jesus now and for eternity.