



## **Supporting Children Through Grief: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers**

1. **How do we support children through their parents' separation or divorce?**
  - It's important to acknowledge that children may experience mixed emotions such as sadness, anger, confusion, and even relief. It's crucial to maintain a consistent routine, reassure them that they are loved by both parents, and emphasize that they are not to blame for the divorce. Encourage open communication, where children feel safe expressing their feelings. You can also offer age-appropriate explanations about the changes in family dynamics, and provide them with coping tools like drawing or journaling.
  
2. **How can we speak to our kids about divorce?**
  - Adult relationships are very complex and difficult for children to understand. Sometimes the intricacies of the "why's" are very confusing for children and sometimes we have to help our kids let go of trying to understand things that they aren't ready to comprehend. Keep the conversation honest, age-appropriate, and calm. Avoid blaming either parent. For younger children, explain that sometimes people have differences and can't live together anymore, but they are still loved by both parents. For older children, allow them to express their thoughts and feelings. Reassure them that they are not responsible for the divorce and emphasize that both parents will continue to be a part of their lives.
  
3. **How can I be emotionally available to my children after divorce and loss of stability/security?**
  - Emotional availability involves being present, listening actively, and responding with empathy. Validate their emotions without judgment, and allow them to

express themselves at their own pace. It's also important to maintain your own emotional balance, as children often look to their parents for cues on how to cope. Prioritize self-care and be sure to take care of yourself so that your presence and attunement with the child feels authentic and healing.

#### **4. How do you explain "divorce" to a 5-year-old (to whom we've never explained "marriage")?**

- For a 5-year-old, you might say something like, "Sometimes people decide they need to live in different houses, but that doesn't mean they love you any less. Both parents still care about you, and you will be taken care of." It's important to keep the explanation simple and focused on their feelings.

It's also very important to be very pragmatic with the child. Be specific about who will pick them up, who will put them to bed. How you will get their stuff from house to house, etc..." Their concerns tend to be very concrete, and being able to picture how it will all happen is often helpful for the little ones.

#### **5. Relocation grief and how to cope?**

- Moving can evoke grief due to the loss of familiar surroundings, friends, and routines. Encourage your child to express their emotions and validate those feelings. Help them build new routines and create new connections. It may be helpful to keep certain familiar elements (photos, favorite activities) that provide comfort during the transition.

Mention how they might be able to keep connections with the most important people like with telephone calls, FaceTime, mailing letters and pictures, etc... Maintaining those connections is as important as making new ones.

#### **6. Effective strategies for fostering resilience in children, and addressing generational trauma?**

- Foster resilience by modeling healthy coping strategies, setting boundaries, and encouraging problem-solving. Children learn from observing their parents, so demonstrate emotional expression, self-care, and healthy grieving. To break generational trauma, parents can address unresolved grief through therapy, open communication, and consciously creating new family dynamics where emotional vulnerability is safe and supported.

**7. How would you speak to a child if their parent died by suicide?**

Speak to the child with truth, sensitivity, and age-appropriate language. It's essential to avoid overloading them with details they cannot process but instead offer simple explanations. Explain that the person has died and give simple details about how they died. Say that the person took their own life, and provide a more detailed explanation of how, such as "they died in a car" or "they made themselves stop breathing." You can also explain that sometimes people with mental illness feel so overwhelmed and sad that they think they don't want to live anymore. It's important to let the child know that feeling this way is a sign of how deeply someone was struggling, and while getting help and taking medicine can make people feel better, it doesn't always work well enough. Emphasize that there are many ways people can find support, and talking about our feelings is an important part of healing. Each of these pieces of information may be enough for a child in one go. Give them time to process it at their own speed, until they ask a further question or you offer a bit more information. If you don't have answers, you can say, "I don't know" or "I wish I knew, I have lots of questions too."

**8. When should I seek professional help for my child after the death of my spouse?**

- If your child exhibits persistent sadness, withdrawal, difficulty functioning at school, or behaviors that are concerning (such as changes in eating or sleeping patterns), it may be time to seek professional help. Therapy can provide a safe space for them to process their grief and develop healthy coping strategies.

If the child is asking to talk to someone about their sadness. We can teach children that there are doctors who help us with our feelings when just talking to family doesn't help enough.

**9. How can I better communicate with my 8-year-old who lost a pet?**

- Grief over a pet can be intense, especially when it's the child's first significant loss. Acknowledge their feelings and let them know it's okay to cry and feel sad. Encourage them to talk about their memories of the pet. If they seem to avoid talking, gently encourage them to express what they are feeling. Be patient with the grieving process and reassure them that it is normal to miss their pet.

**10. How do I provide support for my sister after the loss of her husband?**

- Grief can cause people to act in unexpected ways, and your sister may need time to process her emotions. Offer her your support by listening without judgment, respecting her boundaries, and being present when she needs someone to talk to. She may experience a range of emotions, including anger, sadness, and guilt, so empathy and patience are key.

**11. How do children/teens deal with multiple traumas and losses when they occur close together?**

- Children and teens may experience cumulative grief when faced with multiple losses in a short time. They may become withdrawn, act out, or experience mood swings. It's crucial to provide them with consistent support, give them time to grieve, and help them understand that feeling overwhelmed is okay. Therapy may be beneficial in helping them process the trauma.

**12. How should we handle the grief generated by social acceptance?**

- Social acceptance is often linked to self-esteem, and grief over social rejection can impact a child's emotional health. Help your child develop a strong sense of self-worth that is not dependent on others' approval. Encourage them to express their feelings about social challenges and offer reassurance that they are loved and valued.

**13. Is silence and distancing oneself part of the grieving process?**

- Yes, silence and distance can be a natural part of grieving. Some people may need time alone to process their emotions. If this happens, it's important to respect their space while reassuring them that you're available when they're ready to talk or connect.

**14. What can an older sibling do for their younger siblings experiencing grief?**

- Older siblings can play an important role by holding space for their younger siblings and providing comfort. It's essential to remember that older siblings are grieving too and may be processing their own emotions. They can engage in coping exercises together, such as drawing, journaling, or deep breathing exercises, to support each other in a shared experience. Simply being present, listening without judgment, and offering reassurance can provide a sense of safety and connection during a difficult time.

**15. How do I manage my own grief while helping my children cope?**

- As a parent, it is important to model healthy grieving while also taking care of your own emotional needs. It's okay to show your children that you are sad, but also reassure them that you are there to support them. Self-care is vital, so ensure you have your own support network and seek therapy if needed.

**16. How to help a 5-year-old process the death of a grandparent (8 months later)?**

- Continue to provide opportunities for the child to talk about their grandparent and acknowledge their feelings. You might say, "I know you miss Grandma, and it's okay to talk about her whenever you want." Offer activities that help them remember and celebrate their grandparent's life, such as creating a memory book or drawing pictures.

**17. How do I explain death to an almost 5-year-old?**

- For a 5-year-old, explain death in simple terms like, "When someone dies, their body stops working, and they don't feel any pain anymore. But we can always remember them and love them." It's important to use concrete language and allow them to ask questions when they're ready.

**18. Can you recommend age-appropriate books for death and divorce (ages 5-10)?**

- For death: *"The Invisible String"* by Patrice Karst, *"When Dinosaurs Die"* by Laurie Krasny Brown, and *"I Miss You: A First Look at Death"* by Pat Thomas. For divorce: *"Two Homes"* by Claire Masurel, *"The Divorce Book for Parents"* by Lawrence Shapiro, and *"Dinosaurs Divorce"* by Laurie Krasny Brown.