

# Needs of Bereaved Children

This information is taken from "Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy" Fifth Edition, Page 232-233 J. William Worden

## Bereaved children need to know that they will be cared for.

"Who will take care of me?" is a question on the minds of most children, whether articulated or not. The death of a parent touches primitive anxiety that one cannot survive without a parent, something that is true for the very young, but a feeling that all can experience even into adulthood. In our study, half the children still expressed a concern for the safety of the surviving parent 2 years after the death. Children need to know that they will be safe and cared for, and this can be addressed directly even if the child is not asking it directly. Some children act out to see if they are cared for, and consistently applied discipline can help children feel safer (Librach & O'Brien, 2011).

## Bereaved children need to know that they did not cause the death out of their anger or shortcomings.

The question "Did I cause it to happen?" may be on the child's mind. We learn early in life that strong feelings can injure others. Opportunities to talk about the deceased can often reveal this sense of culpability. A particularly vulnerable age for this kind of thinking is 4-5 years, when children believe in magic, thinking that they have to power to cause things to happen.

## Bereaved children need clear information about the death –

its causes and circumstances. "Will it happen to me?" is on the mind of many children. Contagion must be explained to some children, for example, "If we go to visit Grandpa in the hospital, you can't catch cancer." If children are not given information in terms they can understand, they will make up a story to fill in the blanks, a story often more

frightening or bizarre than the truth. Children need to be told these things in age-appropriate terms. One mother preparing her 5-year old to attend the funeral told him that Daddy's body would be in the casket. Upon hearing that, the child left the room screaming. It was only later that the mother discovered that the child made a distinction between the body and the head. If the body was in the casket, where was the head?

## Children need to feel important and involved.

Including children in decisions about the funeral and in the funeral or memorial service itself can be helpful. Children who have never attended a funeral need to be coached ahead of time as to what will happen at the service and what they might see. It is helpful to assign an adult who is not a family member to look out for younger children in case these children need to leave the service before it is concluded. Involving children in decisions about holiday and anniversary activities as well as cemetery visits can help children feel included while making such memorials a family activity (Softing et al., 2016).

## Bereaved children need continued routine activity.

Children in the study who did best were those whose daily routine could be kept as consistent as possible – mealtimes, bedtime, homework assignments, and the like. Sometimes, bereaved adults do not understand why children go play when the rest of the family is grieving and may need a reminder that children cope through play activity.

## Bereaved children need someone to listen to their questions.

It is not unusual for a grieving child to ask the same question repeatedly, much to the frustration of the adults. Children may want to see if the adult response is consistent as the are struggling with their own feelings. Some questions from younger children may be annoying. The question "Can Grandma still pee in heaven?" may be met with derision by older siblings, but children's questions should be answered with respect.

## Bereaved children need ways to remember the dead person.

An excellent way to do this is to make a memory book in which the children can put pictures, stories, photographs, and other items memorializing the person who died and the events the child shared with that person. This is best done as a family activity and can be done in a simple inexpensive scrapbook. It is my experience that children, as they grow older, revisit the memory book to see who that person was and to speculate who that person would have been had he or she lived.



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