Loss and Grief Through the Eyes of Children and Adolescents

SACHYN Presentation
March 17, 2009

- Children and adolescents experience many of the same emotions as adults.

- The grief of children and adolescents may at times looks like adult grief but it differs in many important ways.
Myths Related to Child and Adolescent Grief

MYTHS

• Young children don’t understand death and are thus spared the pain of grief.
• Children often cope better with loss than other members of the family.
• It’s a good idea to give stories or false information about death to soften the impact of loss for young children.

FACTS

• Your child’s grief reflects his/her current stage of development.
• Children do not have the cognitive development or life experience that adults do. It is normal for them to “dose themselves” or “dip in and out” of their grief.
• Children need age-appropriate information. Failing to give children/adolescents necessary information can create further difficulty for them. A suggested guideline is to follow your child’s lead.
More Myths

• It is helpful to tell a surviving son or daughter that they are now the man or the woman of the house or a replacement for a deceased sibling or a substitute for an adult.
• If a child or adolescent is not showing signs of upset, it is best to leave well enough alone. Why risk upsetting them when they are doing well?

FACTS

• It is important to keep parent-child boundaries intact. Children may distort or sacrifice their own needs to protect a parent or to match what they think is expected of them.
• Don’t misunderstand what may seem to be a lack of feelings. We are just trying to do what we would usually do. Also, we may be trying hard to appear normal.

And, still more Myths

• Grief proceeds in an orderly, predictable way.
• Experiencing the loss of a loved one is an experience which many children/adolescents never recover from.
Facts

- How we feel about grief can change from day to day. Grief is a process.

- “Once tragedy strikes, our job as parents is to help our children integrate the tragedy into their life in ways that leave them competent, contributing and compassionate.” (Emswiler).

8 TRUTHS Re: Child and Adolescent Grief

- Your Child’s Grief Reflects His Current Stage of Development.
- Children Grieve in the Middle of Everyday life.
- Kids Grieve in brief but intense “episodes”.
- Sometimes children and teens TEMPORARILY regress after a death.
- Children and Teens often express their grief in their play or behaviourally.
- Children and teens often postpone their grief.
- Children and teens will revisit their grief at significant and often predictable times in their life.
- Grief is tied to development and will be revisited throughout their lives.

Mary Ann & James P. Emswiler (Guiding Your Child Through Grief)

What Bereaved Children and Adolescents Want Adults to Know
**Avoid Judging My Grief**

**Responses and Don’t Over-react**

- FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH NORMAL GRIEF RESPONSES:
  - Hyperactivity, impulsivity and inability to concentrate are NORMAL.
  - Bodily complaints are NORMAL.
  - Egocentric behaviour is NORMAL.

**FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF (cont’d)**

More Normal Reactions:
- Needing to hear and tell their story again and again,...
- Imitating the behaviour of the deceased
- Appearing to deny the loss or the significance of the loss (COMES FROM A NEED TO APPEAR NORMAL)
- Speaking of a loved one in the present tense
- Worrying about their health or the health of loved ones.
- Grieving in ways different from other members of the family.

**Sometimes I do Want to Talk About It**

- Give me permission to not talk about it, but provide opportunities to talk about it:
  - Encourage me to ask questions.
  - Talk about my loved one so I know that it’s okay for me to talk about him/her.
  - Include me in decisions related to our loss.
  - Keep me informed.
  - Pay attention to my reactions. “Sometimes I want you to know what I need.”
Sometimes I do want to talk about it, cont’d

• Familiarize yourself with typical responses for someone my age:
  – Know that young children worry about magical thinking and that they fear the death of another family member
  – Know that adolescents often have guilt about their relationships and that they need help to differentiate between their thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Sometimes I don’t want to talk about it.

• I may choose not to talk to you about my grief because I don’t want to upset you.
• “Don't crowd me with your own feelings.” (I may become very uncomfortable when I see you upset.)
• “Don’t pry and ask too many questions.”

Be There for Me

• Let me determine if I want space or want to be comforted.
• Spend time with me. Hug me and show me affection.
• Be dependable. I need to know that I can count on you.
• Reassure me that life won’t always be as difficult as it is now.
Let Me and Others Help You
(A Message to Parents)

• Take care of your own bereavement needs.
• Adolescents have the capacity for empathy with other grievers.
• Friends and Family members often want to help but don’t know what to do. Let them help you and be specific.

Tips for “Others”

• Show support to bereaved children and youth
  – send a card, write a note, call to let them know you are thinking about them.
  – Use the deceased person’s name in your conversation with them.
  – Go to the funeral, tell them you are sorry to hear of their loss, hug them and be there for them (beyond the first few months!)
  – Think outside the box of gender-directed assistance for bereaved families. (Support for the Family is Support for the children and adolescents).

An Irish Blessing

*May there always be work for your hands to do.*
*May your purse always hold a coin or two.*
*May the sun always shine on your windowpane.*
*May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.*
*May the hand of a friend always be near you.*
*May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you*