

JESUS

SOMEONE WHO CARES

Mentor's Guide for Grieving Children



Author:
Kelly Dufour

Introduction:

It is estimated that over 2 million children in the U.S. alone (slightly more than 3%) experience the death of a parent before the age of 18. The percentage is much higher when the statistics include additional experiences children usually have, such as death of grandparents, relatives, siblings, classmates, and pets.¹

The death of a loved one and subsequent losses rob a child's sense of security and control. The stress caused by these multiple losses hinders their ability to process the event and leaves them feeling overwhelmed and powerless.

During this difficult time, children look to their parents for security and comfort. Unfortunately, the parents may be physically or emotionally unavailable to provide comfort and care. The parents are often preoccupied with their own emotions and needs and don't have the time, strength, or ability to help their children.

This is why your role is so important. These children need someone to care, someone who will listen, and someone who will walk with them toward healing and hope. You are that person. You may wonder if you are qualified or able to mentor children. Be assured that this manual will give you helpful information and very clear instructions for you to use as you meet with the children. Thank you for committing to make a difference in the lives of hurting children.

“Jesus, Someone Who Cares” Mentor’s Guide for Grieving Children:

Please be sure to read *“A Guide for Mentors”* before meeting with a child. It provides helpful information and resources for talking with children about traumatic events.

The mentor's guide for grieving children is a supplement to the “Jesus, Someone Who Cares” book. This guide will provide you with discussion questions and resources specifically for children who are grieving. As you read the “Jesus, Someone Who Cares” book with the children, this guide will help you apply specific content of the story to their area of emotional hurt.

Commonly Accepted Myths about Children and Grieving:

Adults often have a misunderstanding of children and grief. They tend to think that children are carefree, resilient and too young to understand loss. Therefore, they often accept these following myths as fact:

- *Myth #1: Children don't grieve.*
- *Myth #2: Children are young and they'll get over it.*
- *Myth #3: Children are too young to understand.*
- *Myth #4: Children will understand that someone is dead if you just tell them once.*
- *Myth #5: Children should avoid experiencing pain until adulthood.*
- *Myth #6: Adults need to be strong and hide their pain and grief from children.*²

The truth is that children do grieve. They may not express their grief in the same manner as adults or even other children. In fact, children in the same family may not express their grief in the same way. Several factors such as developmental understanding, previous experiences, and coping with adult's grieving are a few of the factors that influence a child's expression of grief. The following section describes what each developmental age group understands about death.

Developmental Understanding of Death:

It is important for you and the child's parents/caregiver to understand what is going on in the mind and body of a child who is grieving. You may want to pass the information on this section and the next section to the child's parents/caregivers.

Newborn to Three Years: An infant or toddler can sense when there is excitement, sadness, anxiety in the home. He can sense when a significant person is missing and the presence of new people. The child in this development stage has no real understanding of death.

Three to Six Years: The child thinks death is reversible or temporary, like going to sleep or when a parent goes to work. She believes that people who die will come back.

Six to Nine Years: The child begins to understand the finality of death and that all living things die. However, they still do not see death as personal. During this stage, the child tends to personify death. They may associate death with a skeleton or death angel, and some may even have nightmares about them. The child may fear that death is contagious and other loved ones will "catch it" and die, too. A child in this stage is fascinated with issues of mutilation and may become very curious about what the body looks like. He also tends to connect death with violence and may ask, "Who killed him?"

Nine to Thirteen Years: At this stage, the child's understanding is very similar to an adult's understanding of death. She is more aware of the finality of death, that it is irreversible, that all living things die, and that she also will die some day. She also realizes the impact that the death has on her personally.^{3 4}

Common Responses to Death:

Children express their grief by their behavior, emotions, physical reactions, and thoughts. There are predictable ways that children respond to death at different stages.⁵

Infants and Toddlers (*newborn to three years*):

- Absorbs emotions of others around her
- May show signs of irritability
- Changes in eating, sleeping, nursing patterns, crying, and in bowel and bladder movements
- May appear to be searching for the missing loved one

Preschoolers and Young Children (*three to five years of age*):

- Exhibit magical thinking (believes that their thoughts, actions, or words caused the death; or can bring the deceased back)
- May believe that death is a punishment for bad behavior
- Impacted by the parent's emotional reactions
- Displays regressive behaviors (behaviors he has previously mastered); bedwetting, security blanket, thumb sucking, nightmares, etc.
- Difficulty putting feelings into words and will act out feelings through play or behavior
- May become increasingly aggressive and play aggressively with others
- Asks the same questions over and over in an effort to make sense of the loss
- Only capable of showing sadness for short periods of time
- Escapes into fantasy play
- May complain of stomachaches, headaches, difficulty breathing, loss of appetite

- Seeks out affection and physical contact

Early School Age Children (six to nine years of age):

- Anger
- Denial
- Irritability
- Mood swings
- Asks concrete questions (What happened?, Why did it happen?, Who will take care of me?, etc.)
- Guilt and self-blame for the death
- May worry about the physical needs of the deceased (How will they eat? Breathe?)
- Increased aggression (acting out against their feelings of helplessness)
- May complain of stomachaches, headaches, gastro-intestinal issues, difficulty breathing, etc.
- School problems such as avoidance, academic difficulty, lack of concentration
- Withdrawal
- Regression to earlier behaviors

Pre-Teen and Early Teens (*nine to thirteen years of age*):

- Concerned with how his world will change and the loss of the relationship (“Who will take me to the father-daughter banquet?”)
- Crying
- Aggression
- Increased anger
- Guilt
- Resentment
- May be reluctant to talk about the death or share feelings
- Suppressed emotions
- Withdrawal from peers
- Lack of interest in hobbies and other activities
- Academic problems or failure
- May complain of stomachaches, headaches, gastro-intestinal issues, difficulty breathing, etc.
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increasing concern about his physical health^{6 7}

Since children may not know all of the details surrounding the death, they will have a tendency to make up their own reasons. Their reasons may not be based on truth, but rather on their imagination. Young children, especially, may feel that they somehow caused the death to happen which will lead to feelings of guilt. For example, if a child was misbehaving just prior to hearing the news of a loved one’s death, he may feel that this bad thing happened because he was acting badly.

These reactions should be considered normal responses and children should not be shamed or punished for demonstrating these normal behaviors. Rather, they need to know that it is okay to feel the way they do and that you would like to talk with them about their feelings. They also need to know that they won’t always feel this way. Over time, they will feel better as they play, draw, or talk about their feelings and experiences with you and their parents.

Stages of Grief/Loss:

The way a child feels concerning a loss will change as time passes. During a crisis, such as a death, children move through a series of clearly identifiable stages. These stages are considered normal and necessary. It is not healthy for a child to bypass any of these stages. The goal is for the child to pass through each stage in order to produce positive growth and minimize the negative effects. As a caregiver and friend, allow the child to experience each of these stages and be available to listen, empathize, and pray with them. *Note: This information is given so that you can know what a child is experiencing. The parent or caregiver will be responsible to help the child pass through these stages. You may consider giving this portion of the guide to them so that they can know what to expect and how to help their child.*

The following five stages of grief/loss are experienced by children, adolescents and adults. These stages may occur in the order presented; however, this is not always the case. The sequence and timing of stages is really not as important as the individual's acknowledgement that the central emotion of each stage is somehow present.

Individuals tend to move back and forth between stages until healing is achieved. Meaningful events as holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions may also impact how and when these stages are experienced.

1. **Denial and/or Shock:** In this stage, the child is faced with a painful event or circumstance, and either refuses to believe that anything has happened at all, or searches for a less painful explanation. For example, the child may express a belief that someone who has died is merely "on vacation" and will return soon. This stage usually does not last long in relation to the other stages, but in rare cases it may persist for weeks or months.
2. **Anger:** As the child begins to emerge from the stage of Denial and sees the "truth," an overwhelming sense of anger or rage may be felt. The expression of this anger often has a "Why me?" quality to it. Also, the person may feel jealousy or resentment towards others to whom a similar event has not happened. If not dealt with persistently and sensitively, this anger may persist well into adulthood. The developing child/adult, anticipating that others will abandon her, feels angry that the world is an unfair and unsafe place. As a result, there is a reluctance to develop closeness/intimacy with others for fear that something bad will happen.
3. **Bargaining:** During this stage, the child may feel guilty about his own perceived role in the loss. For example, he may tell himself that if he had been a "better" child, the loss might not have occurred. The child may also attempt to enter into agreements with God or family members to postpone having to deal with the inevitable pain of the loss. For example, he may pray that God will "undo" the loss if the child himself behaves better.
4. **Depression:** In this stage the child may be overwhelmed with feelings of sadness, regret, guilt, and even hopelessness that he will ever feel better. While it may be excruciatingly painful for adults to watch their children deal with these feelings, It is necessary and beneficial for the child to be allowed to verbally express his sense of sorrow and loss. (Thoughts of suicide may be present, and the child may even express a desire to join a deceased love one "in heaven." Caring adults should directly ask the child if he is having such thoughts, and should find out if he has a plan and a means for carrying out these thoughts. If so, professional help should be sought immediately.)

5. **Acceptance:** The child moves toward understanding and acknowledging that the loss has occurred and that life will go on; however changed and different it is. In this stage a sense of healing should emerge, and the child should begin to return to normal pre-loss activities and relationships with a sense of hope for the future. In addition to the obvious loss caused by the death of a parent or loved one, there are other losses which may trigger the grieving process.⁸

Tasks of Grieving for Children:

Based on the theories and models of various grief experts and on their own observations, the Dougy Center for Grieving Children has observed and come to believe there are at least three tasks related to grieving a death. Again, this information may be more helpful for the parents and caregivers since they will be with the child most of the time.

1. **To understand that the person is dead.** Children need to know what happened. They need honest, direct, factual information in order to understand that the person is dead.

To help accomplish this task:

- The child's parents/family need to tell the child the truth no matter how difficult. As a mentor, you will want to find out what the parents are telling the child so that you can reinforce what they are telling the child about the death. You do not want to say more than they have already shared with the child.
- Talk when they want to and honor their need to not talk about it.
- Be sure to include children in the process. Let them make choices about how much to be involved in the illness, death, the viewing and memorial of a loved one.
- Answer questions over and over for children. Keep the focus on what the child wants to hear.

2. **To feel the feelings about death.** Grief becomes feelings in our bodies of the "goneness" of the person who died. Grief is also a physical process (sweating, crying, sleeplessness, etc.) and needs physical outlets such as crying, safe yelling, safe hitting, running, etc.

To help accomplish this task:

- Listening, accepting, and caring help children express their grieving feelings and thoughts.
- Encourage safe, physical expressions of energy like sports and active or creative play.
- Reassure children that feeling guilty is common. Present the facts that show they could not have prevented the death.

3. **To go on living and loving after the person has died.** As healing begins, children move from the "Why did it happen?" question to the "What can I do now?" question. One of the ways that children (and adults) come to terms with death is to learn over time to "live with it." The person who died is still a part of their lives in memories. The death is a part of who they are as they go on living.

To help accomplish this task:

- Celebrate the steps they take in their grieving and mourning towards reconciliation.

- Sometimes, someone who is grieving truly enjoys life and then feels guilty and disloyal to the person who died. Encourage and allow children to take “time out” from grief and fun or relax.⁹

Guiding the Child through the “Jesus, Someone Who Cares” Book:

During troubling times, it is comforting to know that there is someone available who cares about us and desires to walk with us through our difficult moments. You will be one of those caring people the child needs. However, even the most caring, available mentor will not be able to be with each child every minute of each day. That is why it is important for you to introduce the child to Jesus and help them discover that Jesus cares about them and is available, anytime, to help them through their struggles in life. Jesus has promised to be with us always. That is the most important truth the child needs to understand through this book – Jesus is someone who cares!

Yaro’s story, which begins on page 12, will be the story that most relates to the child’s experience with grief. The story of the death of Jesus, his burial, and the responses of his followers may also be useful. The overall presentation of the life of Christ in this book will also provide additional discussions that may be helpful in bringing comfort and hope to the child reader.

The following questions can be used to create discussion with the child about the death of his loved one, his feelings, thoughts and reactions. The child may have never told anyone his story. These questions will cause him to think about the death which may lead to strong emotional reactions. The section titled “Emotional Reactions and Suggested Intervention” in the “Guide for Mentor’s” will help you to deal with some possible emotional reactions. If a child does not want to answer a question or talk about what happened, don’t force her to talk. Perhaps she would be more comfortable drawing a picture of her answer or feelings.

The discussion questions below are just suggestions. You do not need to use all of them. You will probably not get through all of these questions in one meeting. The child may need a break or lose interest in the questions. Watch for signs that show the child is no longer interested (child changes the subject, begins to misbehave, acts bored or states boredom, etc.)

After you go through the story and the following discussion questions, talk with the child about the very last page titled “How About You?” The greatest help and hope you can give a child is a relationship with Jesus.

Discussion Questions:

Yaro shares his story of his parents’ death. Let’s spend a little bit of time talking about your story.

1. A family member told Yaro about his parents’ death. How did you learn about [name’s] death?
2. When you first heard the news, what did you do? Think? Feel? *(Note: help the child normalize their feelings. The feelings that they experienced were normal and lots of kids have felt that way, etc.)*
3. What did you do to help yourself feel better after the news?
4. In the book, we see a picture of Yaro at his parents’ funeral. Did you go to the funeral home for visitation? Did you go to the funeral? Cemetery?

5. What did you see or experience at the funeral home? Funeral? Cemetery? *(Note: you may consider having the child draw pictures of this experience.)*
6. Was there anything in particular that really bothered you? If so, what?
7. Yaro's uncle was with Yaro to comfort him. Who comforted you?
8. What were some things that people told you that helped you feel better?
9. Yaro felt that he would never be happy again. In what ways have you felt like Yaro? *(Note: assure the child that his feelings are normal responses to death but that overtime he will begin to feel better.)*
10. If you were with Yaro when he learned that his parents' died, what would you say to him?
11. What do you think Yaro's parents would want to say to him?
12. What do you think Yaro would want to say to his parents?
13. What do you want to tell [name of deceased]? *(Note: encourage the child to write a letter to her loved one sharing how she feels, etc.)*
14. What would [name] want to tell you?
15. Some kids feel responsible for their loved one's death. Have you ever felt like that? *(Note: reassure the child that they were not responsible for the death)*
16. Yaro was having a very hard time with all of that was happening. How is your story similar to his? How is it different?
17. What do you think about [name's] death today? How do you feel about it today?
18. What are you doing now to help yourself feel better?
19. In the Bible story Yaro told, Jesus' close friend Lazarus died. What did Jesus do when he went to see Lazarus' grave?
20. Some people might tell you not to cry. Do you think it is okay to cry when you feel sad?
21. How does it make you feel to know that Jesus has lost a friend to death, too?
22. How does it make you feel to know that Jesus cried, too?
23. Jesus cares about you and wants to help you during this difficult time. In what ways would you like Jesus to help you?
24. How do you ask Jesus to help?
25. What would you want to say to Jesus today? What would Jesus want to say to you?

Closing the Discussion:

It is important that you end the discussion with encouragement and hope. Spend some time talking about the good things that are happening in their lives. Talk about ways that Jesus can help them. You want to leave them with hope, not hurt.

It is best to end your discussion time with prayer. Ask the child if there is anything you can pray with her about. In your prayer, include a prayer of comfort for the child, the assurance that

Jesus loves her and will always be with her (in good times and bad), and that she can always trust in Him. If the child would like to receive Christ as her Lord and Savior, lead her in a prayer of salvation. There is a sample prayer on the last page of “Jesus, Someone Who Cares.”

Tell her that you appreciate her sharing her story and feelings. Let her know that you will continue to pray for her and her family. Tell her that you are available if she needs to talk or would like prayer.

Additional Activities:

Journal: Give the child a blank journal and encourage them to write in it, draw pictures, paste news clippings and pictures, etc. Keeping a journal can be a great way for the child to work out her feelings and see how that over time she begins to feel better as she processes the loss. It will also be a way to memorialize her loved one.

Drawing: Drawings give adults a unique opportunity to see what a child is feeling on the inside. It can also lead to very meaningful conversations. Here are pictures a child can draw:

- Draw something you worry about.
- Draw something that makes you mad.
- Draw yourself and write words that describe you.
- Draw your favorite memory of your deceased father, mother, sister, etc.
- Draw a recent dream that you have had.
- Draw the ugliest picture that you can.
- Draw your family.
- Draw yourself before your loved one died; draw yourself now.
- Draw something that scares you.
- Draw a picture of heaven.¹⁰

Child-Friendly Obituary: Obituaries are generally written from an adult perspective to adult readers. Children may have a different perspective in constructing an obituary. Work with the child to create a “child’s eye” obituary:

[Name], my [relationship] was born on [date] and died on [date].

1. Favorite sports team
2. Favorite flavor of ice cream
3. Some chores he or she let me do
4. Favorite fun thing to do
5. What I will always remember about [name]
6. What I loved and admired about [name]
7. [Name] had a special nickname
8. One thing [name] always said
9. What did [name’s] laugh sound like?
10. One thing I will always miss out [name] will be...¹¹

¹ Goodman, Robin F., Ph.D., *Children and Grief: What They Know, How They Feel, How to Help*, <http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/grief.html>, 2/16/2006.

² Murray, Collen I., Ph.D., *Topic 5: Children and Grief*, <http://www.unr.edu/hcs/hdfs/Grief/children.htm>, 2/17/2006.

³ Hospice Net, *Talking to Children About Death*, <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/talking-pr.html>, 2/16/2006.

⁴ Hospice Net, *Children’s Understanding of Death*, <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/understand-pr.html>, 2/16/06.

⁵ Goodman, *Children and Grief*, pg. 3.

⁶ Hospice Net, *Children’s Understanding of Death*, <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/understand-pr.html>, 2/16/06.

⁷ Goodman, *Children and Grief*, pgs. 3-4.

⁸ Brasch, Mary, M.A. & Beth Keen, Ph.D., *Grief and Loss: The Effects on Children and Facts and Strategies for Parents*, <http://www.notmykid.org/parentArticles/Grief>, 2/17/2006.

⁹ The Dougy Center for Grieving Children, *Lost & Found: A Place for Hope Through Grieving – Facilitator Training Manual* (September 2003), pgs. 8-10, adapted.

¹⁰ Smith, Harold Ivan, *When A Child You Love Is Grieving* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2004), page 61.

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 76.