

HEALING A CHILD'S GRIEVING HEART

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100 PRACTICAL IDEAS
FOR FAMILIES, FRIENDS & CAREGIVERS

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Companion
PRESS

Fort Collins, Colorado
An imprint of the Center for Loss and Life Transition

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Companion Press is an imprint of the
Center for Loss and Life Transition,
3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526

Companion Press books may be purchased in bulk for sales promotions, premiums or fundraisers. Please contact the publisher at the above address for more information.

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 5 4 3

ISBN: 1-879-651-28-9

1.

Understand the difference between grief and mourning.

- Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we experience when someone loved dies.
- Mourning is the outward expression of our grief. Mourning is necessary for healing to take place.
- I often refer to children as "forgotten mourners." Why? Because though all children grieve when someone loved dies, we (as a society, as families and often as individuals) rarely encourage them to mourn.
- You can help the grieving child you love by encouraging her to mourn. You can be the person she feels "safe" to mourn in the presence of.

Carpe Diem

Think about your own experiences with grief. Did you mourn?
If so, what ways of mourning were helpful to you?

2.

Observe that kids *mourn more* through behaviors than words.

- Often grieving children don't talk and talk about their feelings. Instead, they act them out.
- For example, the child may act mooney and lethargic but may not have the words to pinpoint how he's feeling or why, specifically, he's feeling that way.
- Watch for mourning behaviors in kids. A child who is feeling confused might get easily upset. A child who is angry about the death might misbehave or pick fights with other kids.
- Children also mourn through their play. Watch for their feelings to come out in the ways they pretend, relate to other kids, physically move, create artwork, etc.

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Spend some time simply observing the grieving child today.
What can you learn by watching him just "be"?

3.

UNDERSTAND THE SIX NEEDS OF MOURNING

Need 1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.

- The child must gently confront the reality that someone she loved is dead and will never physically be present to her again.
- Children tend to accept the reality of a death in "doses." That is, they let in just a little of the pain at a time then return to their play or other distractions. This "dosing" of grief is not only normal but necessary, for it makes the early days of grief bearable.
- Help the child understand what "dead" physically means. Explain that the body can no longer think, feel, hear, breathe, etc. and will never be "alive" again.
- Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, the child may take years to fully integrate the reality of the loss. As she gets older and matures developmentally, the death will take on new layers of meaning and greater depth.

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Today, talk about the physical reality of the death.
Make sure the child understands how and why the person died.

4.

UNDERSTAND THE SIX NEEDS OF MOURNING

Need 2. Feel the pain of the loss.

- Like all mourners, children need to embrace the pain of the loss. Fortunately, most children haven't yet learned how to repress or deny their feelings. If they're sad, they generally allow themselves to be sad.
- You can help by encouraging the child to talk about his painful thoughts and feelings and by being a nonjudgemental listener.
- You can also model your own grief feelings. If you're sad, express your sadness in the child's presence.
- Children will naturally "dose" their pain. Support this child as he allows his pain in, little by little.

Carpe Diem

The next time the child cries, resist the natural urge to encourage him to stop crying. Instead, hold him gently and let him cry as long and hard (and as often) as he wants to.