

When a Loved One Dies – Helping Children & Youth Cope with Death

*“For everything there is a season,
And a time for every matter under heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;”*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2a NRSV

While we may accept these words from Ecclesiastes, living in the midst of times when we are experiencing the death of someone we love is not easy for us as adults. And in the midst of dealing with our own grief, we may forget the needs of children and youth who are dealing also with grief and loss.

As a start, it is good to be reminded of a statement found in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* in the Social Principles: “...we recognize that every mortal life will ultimately end in death. Death is never a sign that God has abandoned us, no matter what the circumstances of the death might be. As Christians we must always be prepared to surrender the gift of mortal life and claim the gift of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (page 114).

As the writer of Romans 8:38-39 says, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (NRSV).

And even as we embrace these statements, sometimes in our humanness, we say and do things that end up making death more difficult for children and youth. Rita Hays in her book *The Children’s Minister* addresses some of the statements and actions to avoid. These include:

Phrases to avoid:

- He or she is asleep. (Children will think the person is coming back, and they could fear going to sleep at night.)
- The person has passed away or expired. (These are vague terms, and young children do not understand them. It is best to use the word, “died.”)
- Now you will have to be the man (or adult) of the house. (A child or youth is not a substitute adult.)
- God took your mother because she was such a good person and God needed her in heaven. Or God loved him or her so much God took him to heaven to be with him. (This can cause a person to resent or fear God.)

- God needed another angel, so God took your grandmother. (Angels are not humans but special messengers of God. (Again, the result of this statement can be fear or resentment of God.)

Actions to avoid:

- Assuming that a child or youth is too young to experience grief. All humans from the youngest to the oldest experience grief. The way we express grief and understand death can differ because of age. But grief at the death of a loved one is a shared human experience.
- Stopping talk of the one who has died for fear that children and youth will be sad. Remember – all who lose someone they love are already sad. By avoiding talking about the death, we increase fear instead of standing alongside of one another in our grief.
- Feeling the need to fill time with talk. Just as we may avoid talk, we can find ourselves as adults talking too much. We need to invite children and youth to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings. We need to provide the space for children and youth to voice their concerns, their sadness, their confusion, their memories.

So what can adults do at the time of death of a loved one and the inevitable grief that envelops us? In the leaflet, *“Helping Your Child Cope with Grief”* from the series FaithHome for Parents, suggested steps are described by these categories:

Education

Teach children and youth (as well as adults) that a major loss produced intense feelings that must be expressed. Talk freely about those feelings. Assure all that these are a natural expression of our love for the person who has died. And also reassure those who are grieving that it takes time before we feel better. For younger children (and even for some youth and adults), we need to be clear that there is nothing they thought or did that caused the loved one to die.

Permission

Create a climate that allows those who grieve to share anger, guilt, sadness, or shame in verbal or physical ways. Don't ask the child to postpone, deny or cover up these feelings. Instead, when a child or youth opens up, adults need to stop what we are doing, get physically close (in appropriate ways), and listen. While we also need to give ourselves permission to express our feelings as well, we do need to not let ourselves fall apart to the point that we cannot be responsive to the needs of the child or youth.

This permission giving also involves including children over the age of 4 and youth in the family and faith community rituals of mourning and remembering.

Support

In addition to paying attention to children and youth in the immediate grieving, other areas to address include:

- Share what you know of upcoming events to honor the loved one and how this will modify daily routines.
- Make sure children and youth have adequate time for rest. Grieving is exhausting.
- Have nutritious food readily available. Sometimes in the midst of grief, schedules of eating are disrupted. Without adequate nourishment, emotional stability becomes more difficult.

Rick & Sue Isbell in their book, *Capture the Moment: Building Faith Traditions for Families*, provide suggestions for things to do and things to talk about in the family when a loved one dies. Some of those suggestions include:

Things to Talk About

- How would you describe the person who has died?
- How do you think the one who has died would want to be remembered?
- How is the world a better place because the one who had died lived and was our friend/family member?

Things to Do

- Encourage family members to remember good times they had with the person who has died.
- Collect and share pictures of the loved one.
- Provide ways for honoring the one who has died: monetary memorials; writing about special memories; creating a memory table where people can place items that speak to them about the one who has died.
- Remembering the important dates in the loved one's life: birthdays, achievements, milestones.
- Provide a prayer and asking all who loved the one who has died to pray that prayer at a certain time, wherever they may be. One that Rick and Sue wrote is as follows: "Dear God, we give you thanks for the life of (name). We grieve and hurt because (name) is no longer with us. We know that (name) is now with you and you are with us. Help us to go on living a faithful life as a disciple of Jesus

Christ, who overcame death. Amen.” (p 79 *Capture the Moment*, Discipleship Resources: 1998).

- Read with children and youth appropriate books and articles. Read also books or articles that will give adults deeper information regarding death, dying, and faith.

Resources

What do I do When Teenagers Deal with Death? By Steven Gerali (Kindle Edition: Harper Collins Publishing, 2010) This is part of a series produced by Youth Specialties. While the primary focus is for teens when another teen dies, it is helpful for helping teens deal with death, no matter the age of the loved one.

The Fault in Our Stars – blog entry by Chris Wilterdink (staff member of the General Board of Discipleship, Young People’s Ministry). This is a reflection on Wesley’s theology and the popular book/movie of young people who are dying with cancer. It can be viewed at: <http://globalyoungpeople.org/the-fault-in-our-stars/>.

In Times of Pain and Crisis: Helping Children Cope and Heal – leaflet by Melanie Gordon (staff member of the General Board of Discipleship, Leaders Ministries). This short article explains the importance of Holy Listening with children. It can be viewed at: <http://www.gbod.org/resources/in-times-of-pain-and-crisis-helping-children-cope-and-heal>. This is not specific to death, but includes a strategy for helping children when they experience pain and hurt including times such as divorce, death, deployment of a parent, and so on.

Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grownups by William C. Kroen, Ph.D. (Free Spirit Publishing, 1996)

The Children’s Minister by Rita B. Hays (Discipleship Resources, 2007)

Capture the Moment: Building Faith Traditions for Families by Rick & Sue Isbell (Discipleship Resources, 1998. Out of Print)

Books for Children:

Water bugs & Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children by Doris Stickney

Everett Anderson’s Goodbye by Lucille Clifton

How it Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krementz

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