





“We’ll laugh again”

What grieving kids need to hear from the adults around them

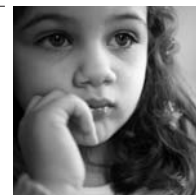
“WE’RE GOING TO CRY FOR A WHILE, BUT SOMEDAY we’ll laugh again,” my mother said to my sister and me the morning she came to let us know that our daddy had died during the night. I was eight; Brenda was four. The words spoke volumes of wisdom, reality and hope and have served me well as a child growing up with several deaths in my immediate family and in my current role as a hospice grief support chaplain.

When I hear of or meet kids who are dealing with the death of someone close to them, particularly a parent or sibling, I find myself wondering how they will make it. Will they ever be happy

When children are old enough to feel attachment to a person, a pet or even a possession, they are also able to grieve a loss. While their sense of loss is just as great for them as it is for us as adults, the ways that children express their grief may be quite different. Understanding a child’s perspective and offering our support and understanding regarding the mysteries of death and dying, as limited as it might be, is most important.

It is generally more helpful for kids to face the reality of death to the degree that they are able rather than to be shel-

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again? Then I remember: I was one of those kids. I made it, and I look back on a happy childhood. I also gained a deep awareness and gratitude for my Abba Father who guided me through the journey of grief.

What made this possible?

Looking back, I think my mom processed her own grief in good ways. If adults always appear to be strong and upbeat and send the message that life is normal, children may not feel free to share what’s going on inside for them. Mom cried with us but she also had friends and pastoral support. This let her deal with her own pain and therefore find strength to offer us hope and joy for the future.

While there are many questions and emotions that can be intimidating to those wanting to offer support for grieving kids, the most important help one can give is simply to be available. A community of caring people can provide added encouragement when family members are in need of support for themselves. Going home with a friend who had a “complete” family was always a special event for me as a kid. There have also been substitute dads along the way who helped fill some of the void of Dad’s death.

I have had the privilege as a pastor and hospice chaplain of walking with a variety of families on grief journey as they adjust to the transitions that are part of life after a death. I trust the following observations will be helpful to those who want to support children in times of grief.

tered or protected from the sadness and finality. Opening the door to kids’ questions and answering them as asked increase their sense of security. It is also most appropriate to acknowledge that answers are not always easy to find.

Children’s concerns are often quite practical. One little boy whose grandpa died developed what was thought to be asthma or panic attacks whenever he went to bed. After talking with his parents, it seemed that his breathing problem was more likely related to the fact that he was worried about his grandpa being able to breathe underground in that closed box. After the boy was able to talk about his concern the breathing issue was resolved.

As adults, we need to think carefully about the language we use. To a child phrases like “gone away,” “on a long trip” or “we lost our sister” suggest that a return is possible. Without more detail or intensity than children can handle at their age and developmental stage, it may be helpful to say the body has stopped working and cannot be fixed, that the part of the person that is most important can live forever with Jesus, and that we can meet again.

Do these responses answer all questions? Definitely not—not for children or for us adults. But it gives perspective to the grief journey of adjusting to life without the phys-

ical presence of someone loved. After hearing that her grandma had gone to heaven, a child accompanied her family to the viewing at a funeral home. After waiting for what seemed to her a very long time, the child said to her mom, “If this is heaven, it’s really boring!” Adults who attempt to think in literal terms as children tend to do can add much sensitivity to their support for kids.

Being alert to children’s possible fears at the time of a death is helpful in providing a safe place for them. Death brings many changes. I remember praying every day as a child that my mommy wouldn’t die. Now I knew that the death of a parent was very possible. What would

place. Continuing to find ways to honor the memory of the one who died is an important part of the grief journey for years after the death.

Children, like adults, will continue to revisit their grief at various stages of life. Being only eight when Dad died, I was accustomed to life without him. So why did I cry intensely as a young adult seeing “Fiddler on the Roof?” I finally recognized that watching Tevia’s interactions with his daughters made me realize some of what I had missed growing up without a dad’s perspective and encouragement.



I remember praying every day as a child that my mommy wouldn’t die. Now I knew that the death of a parent was very possible. What would happen to us kids if Mom died?

happen to us kids if Mom died? Assuring children that the remaining parent hopes to live a long time and that there are others who love them and will always be available to care for them is comforting.

Sometimes children fear that they are somehow responsible for the death. Maybe there had been a recent disagreement or behavior that causes the child to wonder if the death is a punishment or result of something they did or didn’t do. This possibility highlights again the importance of sharing with children about diseases and accidents that are part of this imperfect world but are not the fault of any one person.

Statements such as “God needed Mommy in heaven” can be very troubling for a child—or adult—who wants and needs to trust God and his goodness and comfort. Our mother did an exceptional job of telling and demonstrating that God was a “father to the fatherless.” Rather than being told that God took our daddy, we were frequently reassured that God loved us, would care for us, understood our sadness and would walk with us.

A child’s sense of security may also be threatened by concerns about family finances. Who will pay the bills? Who will do the things the deceased always did? Kids may also develop a strong sense of responsibility for the remaining parent or family members. They may take on more responsibility than they need to at a time when they need to process their own vulnerability and just be kids.

At the same time, it’s important that children not feel excluded from adult planning and processing, if they desire to be involved. There is a difference between grieving and mourning for kids just as there is for adults. Grieving describes what is felt inside such as sadness, anger, confusion or fear. Mourning is the outward expression of those feelings.

Helping kids find ways to express what they feel inside is a wonderful gift. Encouraging them to write a letter or draw a picture for their loved one that is placed in the casket or read at the memorial service can be helpful. They might want to gather some favorite items that remind them of the one who has died and place them in a special

place. It’s also very common for kids to want to get away at times from the sadness, to be alone, to be with friends and in situations that feel normal. Giving permission and even encouraging expressions of happiness and play in the midst of sadness is a way of reminding children of hope. Grief is best processed in smaller doses, not all at one time.

Time with friends can be most helpful, especially for adolescents. While youth may appear uncaring or distant, they are dealing with their own fears and discomfort with feelings they don’t feel free to express in public. If children and adolescents act as if their world has turned upside down, it’s because it has. Gifts of space, love and support when kids are ready may be what they most need.

Each child’s grief journey will be unique. It’s important not to make comparisons among death experiences or among children in terms of coping skills and methods of processing. Each child’s relationship with the deceased is unique as is each child’s way of dealing with the loss.

There are no schedules or time limits for the grief process. Finding a new normal can be a long, slow, winding part of the grief journey. But it is a journey of hope. Christ’s resurrection impacts every part of the process, even though at times that reality is something we choose to believe in our heads when we don’t feel it in our hearts.

As I look back, we did cry and missed much without Dad. But, we also laughed and discovered that facing the realities of death gave opportunity to grow in dependency, love and trust in the Giver of Life.

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