

The Grieving Child

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From his book, *Lean On Me Gently*

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The grief of a child

The onion analogy is also a good way to show the differences between adult grief and that of a child. We know what an adult would do if handed an onion. Think of what a four year old boy would do and you begin to see the differences. We would analyze the onion. The little boy would experience the onion and then play with it until it is torn up completely. The onion would be found several days later in a closet. Little boys and dogs both run off and hide things. The analogy sounds simple but it pictures what happens with children in grief.

Children experience things

Children don't think through their feelings, they simply experience them. They still have a sixth sense that allows them to feel the air and understand. As adults grow to depend more on logic they lose the sixth sense. A look at children's literature is all that is necessary to prove this. I read Dr. Seuss to my grandchildren. Who can understand *Green Eggs and Ham*? My grandchildren sit enraptured. They don't care how much the words mean, they are experiencing the story, not the words. I wish I still had that ability.

I attended a conference lead by a psychologist. She wanted us to connect with our childhood, so she gave us a toothbrush and told us to relate to the toothbrush like a child. An adult would analyze the brush. "This is a Squibb, it has stiff bristles, it is blue and it cost too much." A child will experience the brush. They will bite it, bang it on the floor, play like they are cleaning up the whole world, and after a little while move on and forget the brush.

Children sense that something is wrong. They may not understand death, or even be told about death, but they know something is different. This is why our efforts to protect them often backfire. Too often we shuffle them off to friends or family so they will not have to know about the death. Or we do not allow them to go to the funeral home to say good-bye for fear they will be scared by the experience. Our hope is that they will not even know anything is wrong. But they are far ahead of us. They are experiencing. They know, and they feel left out and unimportant, or even a sense of rejection. Some children even decide it is their fault. Instead of sheltering and protecting them we need to focus on those things that help them to express their feelings and be a part of the family's experience. When children are included in the process they feel accepted and an important part of a profound family event.

When children are not included in the family's grief they are left to their own imaginations. Too often imagination makes the image worse than reality. This became real to me with my four year old grandson. When my mother died, we did not make arrangements for him to see her before the funeral. He was sitting in my lap at the grave side, and pointed to the casket and said in a rather loud voice, "What is that?" I tried to whisper some explanation, but he continued with, "How is she going to get out of there?" Our efforts to protect had left far too much to the imagination of a four year old little boy.

Since they are experiencing instead of analyzing they may not grieve in obvious ways. They have had a hard time reacting emotionally. They will react in terms they understand and in the terms of what they have lost.

We tend to panic and think they are not grieving properly, or we decide they are not in grief and have no need for help.

Children play

Play is what children do for a living. One of their first responses to grief will be to wonder if they can still play. Play is how they work through their feelings. The afternoon of my mother's funeral I missed the four small grandchildren. I also noticed the cut flowers that had been brought to our house were looking quite forlorn. I slipped into the front room of our house and watched unseen as the kids played funeral all afternoon. They had gathered all the flowers possible and were busy holding funerals. The one who was playing the part of the dead person was laid out on the organ bench. When their mock service was over, the one playing dead was placed under the bench. They played over and over until each of them had been buried many times.

Three years ago my daughter delivered a baby on Christmas Eve. He died on Christmas Day. After the funeral, my daughter and her family came to our house for a few days. Her two sons went to the basement of our house as soon as they arrived and stayed there most of the time for two days. When we finally went down to the basement to see what they had been doing, we found they had created a life for their little brother. They made cutouts to hang all over the room. Their brother became a pilot who married a female sheriff. In two days of play they worked through their feelings they could never express in any other way.

Children hit and run

If a child is playing with an object they will pick at it for a little while and then run off, either leaving the object on the floor or taking it with them for future play sessions. That is how they deal with grieving situations. Matter of fact, that is how they deal with any situation that requires the expression of feelings. They will sit on your lap in deep seriousness talking about the death and then suddenly say, "I want to go ride my bike now."

Children instinctively know how much they can handle. When that point is reached they are gone. They also are checking to see if play is still appropriate. Play is what they do for a living and they need to know it is still there for them.

We may think that nothing has been accomplished in these brief times of sharing and feel some sense of panic. There is no way to measure what is happening in the mind of a child. Nor can we measure how much good has been done in these simple times that are often so short you do not realize they were happening.

An eight year old girl was in a car wreck with her mother who did not survive the crash. The girl was in a coma for several weeks. When she woke up, the funeral was over and life was going on. No one talked to her about the wreck. When she returned to school one of her friends finally said, "Did your mother really die?" She answered, "Yes." Years later when she told me the story, she said, "It felt wonderful to be able to talk about it. All I said was, 'yes,' but that yes broke open the dam on my emotions." One simple word meant more than can be expressed. Your child may be having those same kind of experiences in activities in which you see no value or substance at all.

Children relate to the loss in their way

They will relate to the loss in terms of what they lost. "Grandpa promised to take me fishing and now he died." That sounds selfish, but that is what the child lost. When they express their loss in these terms we need to help them establish the significance of that loss. Our natural response will be to make the child feel better

in some way, so we say, "Oh there will be many other people to take you fishing." Or we may say, "How would you like a trip to the ice cream store?" Our first reaction will be to paint a bright picture and cheer them up. We try to change the way our child feels by changing the way they think. These kind of responses trivialize the loss the child feels. When they try to tell us their loss and we trivialize it away, they are not likely to talk to us about it again. We have made them feel their problem was not real or important.

It takes courage on our part, but we need to say, "Not going fishing with Grandpa is really going to hurt isn't it." That says that you are taking the responsibility seriously and that it is all right to talk about it with you. These kind of responses allow the child to establish the significance of the loss. Significance really matters in grief.

Children grieve in their own time

A child will pick the times when they wish to bring up the subject. "We are going to get an ice cream cone and Suzy can't go cause she died." What a time to bring that up! But the child will bring it up when they feel safe. Times like this are safe because they know there will not be much follow-up. You aren't likely to have a deep discussion about the loss in an ice cream store. If we respond with calmness and say something like, "I miss Suzy the most at times like this," the child may feel free to say more during the ride to the store. Some times they bounce these statements off of us to see if we are ready to talk or if we will hush them and change the subject. Remember they don't know there are any rules for when to talk. I wish we adults had the same freedom.

It may help to remember the woman who said, "That yes broke open a dam on my emotions." We have no idea what just saying, "Suzy died," has done for the child.

Children grieve slowly

Kids have a great ability to deny reality. They are good at it. A man in a suicide survivors group told of finding his father's body. He was a twelve year boy at the time. He said he looked into the bedroom that morning and saw his father there. It was very evident what had happened, but he closed the bedroom door and went to school until mid-afternoon and then decided he had better go look after his father. That takes a lot of denial, but children are very capable at doing just that.

Your child will deal with grief when, and only when, he or she is ready to do so. You can offer your support. You can let them know it is all right to talk about it, and it is all right to talk about it to you, but they will determine the time. Far too many parents panic and decide their children are not grieving properly when the child is just not ready yet. They will control the length. They will grieve when they are ready, and for as long as they are ready.

The grief of a child is a broken line

They will do the grief work they are capable of doing at the age they are. Quite often they will pick the grief up again a few years later and do what can be done with at that age. They may continue this process until they are adults.

A woman told of her husband dying when her daughter was eight. She felt very good about how her daughter dealt with the grief at that time. She said, "When my daughter was thirteen we were headed to the dentist to get her braces removed. That should be a great day for any young girl, but she was crying softly as we drove. I asked her why and she said, 'No one told me they never come back.' Does that mean she never got over her grief when she was eight?" I don't think it means that at all. It just means that she was ready to pick it up and

do the thirteen year old part of grieving. The return of grief means they are making a very healthy journey by doing the steps when they are ready and able to face each one.

Children use questions

Why? How?

Who will take care of me now?

Will it happen to me, or to someone I know?

These are the basic questions we all have and there are no real answers to any of them. You may find them very threatening and feel ill-equipped to answer. There are a couple of things to keep in mind.

First: The child is looking for reassurance more than answers. It is all right to say "I don't know why things happen but I will always be here for you." There are ways of giving the child assurances about the future without going into philosophic details of our morality.

Include the child in discussions of future plans. Let them know they are cared for. Don't assume anything. They wonder if they will have to move. They wonder if they can keep their puppy. They wonder if they will be adopted. It seems like they should already know these things, and usually they do, but they are looking for assurance.

Second: The questions are used to hide the real agenda. It is easier to say, "Why did this happen," than to say, "I am hurting." Most of the time when they question they are looking for a way to get into the subject and don't know any other way. We can use this as an opening to say, "You know I think about Grandpa all the time and it hurts but feels good at the same time. I miss him, but I like to remember him, don't you?" Hopefully that will open the door for one of those hit and run sessions kids are so good at.

In general we should answer the basic questions they ask and wait for them to respond. If they ask for more information or ask another question, then we should respond with honesty. The child will let you know when this session is over. Always try to leave the door open for further questions. It is always important for the child to know that these talks are welcomed.

Things to notice: Watch for red flags

In Oklahoma we say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Bad grammar – but, good advice. We almost feel that every child who goes through grief automatically needs to go to a counselor. Most children will find a way to work through their grief without the need for professional help. Those who need some help will let you know. There will be changes in the child that will persist over a period of time. Every child will show some of these changes. The intensity and length are the issue. If the changes are dramatic and they do not pass in a few weeks, it is time for concern. Some of the changes to notice are:

Changes in personality: The child starts hiding out in his or her room and isolating from the family when this has been a habit. Or the change may be opposite and they become overly dependent and cling to you.

Acting out anger: The child may start having fights, throwing tantrums, getting in trouble at school or giving the teacher problems and that has not been a pattern before the event.

If grades drop significantly, that can also be something to explore.

Lack of emotional expression regarding the loss: Over time the child's reactions seem to be wooden or formal and they do not seem to have any emotion at all about the loss.

Change in health status: Increased complaints about ill health. Development of psychosomatic illness, or seem to be listless and have little energy.

Prolonged depression with tension, insomnia, and feelings of worthlessness and self blame.

Prolonged resistance to recognizing the loss: They dream up ways to make the person still here so they can deny the death.

The appearance of red flags does not automatically mean you must go for help. It may mean the child has not found a way of talking it out at home, and giving the place and space to do so may be all that is required. If these efforts fail and the child will not open up to you, or anyone else that you know of, then looking for some outside help is appropriate. Sometimes a teacher can do wonders. Some school counselors are helpful. Some ministers or youth ministers can step in. If there is a center for children's grief then you are most fortunate. Places like this are helpful whether or not the child shows great problems. There are also professional counselors who specialize in children's grief.

For additional bereavement support and resources from Doug Manning,

Visit *Grief Safe Place*: <http://www.thecarecommunity.com/GriefSafePlace/tabid/59/Default.aspx>