

Dealing with Bereavement

Discussing bereavement can be such a challenging topic that many of us don't face it head on, we'd rather deal with it when it happens or hope that it gets taken care of by some other means. However, acknowledging death and dealing with the concept of loss in general everyday life can ease the discussions when you really have to face the issue. Here are 5 tips for dealing with bereavement:



1. Think about YOU!

Make way for your emotions and ensure you have support. It is especially difficult dealing with your child's feelings while yours are in a heightened state. Ensure you have a good outlet, a friend or family member who can help you come to terms with your side of the bereavement process, freeing you up to deal with your child's emotions. Doing the British "stiff upper lip" will only display to your child that this is what's expected (they will be watching your every move for cues as to how to react). Conversely, using your child as your comforter may cause the child to believe they are responsible for making you feel better which can deepen any feelings of guilt they may already have.

2. Teach the circle of life

You may wish to start preparing your child well in advance of their first bereavement by being very open and honest about the lifecycle of things around us. Consider spending time with your child watching the seasons change (new life in spring, leaves and flowers dying in autumn) or witnessing seeds grow, transform and the fruit/flowers die. Each of these things paves the way to understanding that death is a natural part of life and our existence. Also, identifying loss in everyday life can help. Ask your child to identify a small, medium and large loss, e.g. a sock, favourite teddy, animal, loved one. Talk about how they dealt with each of those losses and identify what strategies they can use when they face loss again in the future.

3. Be honest

Answering questions openly and honestly will help your child to understand and process their feelings. Although it is tempting to tell a child about the “special farm where all dogs live when they leave you” or that “granddad has just gone to sleep” it is romanticising the idea of death. Children get enough of this from books and films: princesses coming back to life when kissed, women falling out of windows only to come back as a superhero’s etc. Your child needs you to be honest about real life yet sympathetic in your discussions.

4. Process feelings

Work with your child to understand each of the feelings they have and to reassure them that they are normal. Your feelings when faced with bereavement may be very different from that of your child. If they’re not showing signs of sadness or loss, don’t force it, let it play out in its own time. Be aware of the emotions they are experiencing and support them through each. Feelings they may encounter are:

Sadness – This will most likely be due to the acknowledgement of the loss, but it could also be based on a desire (but failure) help you or other members of the family with the bereavement.

Anger – Your child may feel angry that something/someone has been taken away from them (in the same way as when you remove a toy). Alternatively they may want to express anger at the “thing” that’s taken the loved one away (e.g. illness). As children find it difficult to identify the cause of the loss, their anger may be deflected onto you or another member of the family.

Guilt – Your child may feel guilty that they didn’t do something to stop the death or that they were even the cause of it (e.g. “if I’d been good it wouldn’t have happened”). Guilt can also be generated if the child feels that they don’t want to grieve or they have been sad for long enough. I’ve seen many children wrestle with the question “how long should I be sad for?” When they start enjoying life again, misplaced guilt can kick in if they feel it’s too soon to be having fun.

Anxiety – Your child may feel anxious that they may lose other members of the family too. The moment they realise that death is truly final and therefore the loved

one is not coming back can trigger a wave of anxiety that they may be left alone if the same thing happens to the rest of the family.

For each of these feelings spend time investigating them together. Draw on previous events or resources, provide reassurance that the child is not responsible, each of these feelings are normal and that they are safe. Also remember the death of a loved one is an opportunity for children to learn that they can handle sad things in life and dealing with it provides the confidence that they can cope with other challenging life events in the future.

5. Create memories

Create a memory book/board/box. It's an important positive step to help your child to understand that although the loved one has been taken away, no-one can take away your precious memories. Looking back over photos, telling stories of unique days together or singing meaningful songs all go to cement the existence of the loved one in our lives. Creating the box will elicit shared memories and special moments that you can laugh and cry over together. The box will also serve as a comfort when the child feels sad or lonely during and after the grieving process. It's extremely sad when the people/animals we love become a memory but they are memories you can cherish forever.

If your primary aged child is struggling with their emotions, check out The Feelings Basket books and toys at www.feelingsbasket.co.uk for support.

