



**When a child laughs ...**

*... We share their joy*

**When a child plays ...**

*... We enjoy their fun*

**When a child cries ...**

*... We dry their tears*

**When a child hurts ...**

*... We feel their pain*

**When a child grieves ...**

*... We remain silent*

Children are definitely one of the “forgotten mourners” in our society. Sometimes we ignore their grief because we don’t realize they actually grieve. Sometimes we don’t know how to deal with them. Still there are times when we’re so engulfed in our own grief that we don’t have the time or energy to give to them. Children that are grieving must have our help. Their emotional, mental and spiritual development depends on it. Learning to grieve is as important as learning other life skills. Therefore in order for adults to teach them how to grieve well we need to understand how they grieve.

### ***Children grieve in their own way***

When adults grieve they will grieve the past, the present and the future. For example, we understand that death means we have lost a loved one for the rest of this life, that there will be no more memories created and any future dreams are gone. Children will concentrate on the present. They don’t think about past memories or about what future won’t have. They only know ... and feel ... that their life is messed up and someone is missing.

### ***Children grieve in spurts***

Children have a built in “grief regulator”. It’s a very normal thing to see a child that is grieving go from tears one minute to laughing the next. They may come home from a family member’s funeral and go out to play or watch a cartoon show. Adults try and process all of their grief at once but children will grieve in spurts. It’s a God given, built in preservation mechanism.

### ***Children grieve as deeply as adults***

When children do grieve they can grieve as intense as adults. They will cry, act out, get angry and exhibit many of the same symptoms of grief as would any adult. We should never minimize their grief simply because they are children. They may not understand all the ramifications when a loved one dies but they do feel the effects. They hurt, they cry and they ask why.

### ***Don’t hide your grief from them***

Children easily pick up on emotions from adults and they know when “something’s wrong”. Children are already learning how to deal with normal growing emotions. When you add grief to the mix it seriously complicates their life. They need to see that adults do grieve but they also need to see how to handle that grief. The pattern that we show them as adults is the path that they will take when they face grief later in life.

### ***Don’t try to cover or replace their pain***

Most adults aren’t comfortable around other adults when they are grieving. We may care for them but we don’t know how relate or how to help so we have a tendency to avoid them. However, when it comes to children we can be just as uncomfortable but instead of avoiding them we try and *remove* their grief, their tears and their pain. Obviously we react this way because we care for them, we hurt with them and we want to get rid of their grief. Thus we are tempted to say things like “Don’t cry. It’s going to be all right”. Or maybe “Let’s go get some ice cream then you’ll feel better”. The child then learns that the way to avoid the pain is to *replace it*. The problem then resurfaces when they are adults and in order to cope with the pain of grief they try and replace it again. However, this time ice cream won’t work and it takes something much stronger like drugs, alcohol or becoming a workaholic. When a child is grieving simply hold them close, let them cry and reassure them that you love them.

### ***Don't minimize their grief***

There are many things that a child will grieve over if they lose it. Some of those things we might seem as trivial and we expect them to “grow up and quit acting like a baby”. Obviously some issues such as a broken bicycle or a lost doll can be easily remedied. However, these grief episodes are real for a child and should never be criticized. When it comes to the death of a loved one or the separation from a close family member or friend it can be as devastating on a child as it is on an adult. The worse thing that you can do is ignore their grief and assume that they can adapt on their own.

### ***Answer their questions honestly and practically***

Children are by nature full of questions. When dealing with a loss, especially when it involves death, their minds become overloaded with the hard questions. It's usually best to wait until they ask but when the questions come answer them truthfully. Instead of saying that “Grandpa is *sleeping*” say that “Grandpa is *dead*”. Explain death, funerals and the grave as simple as you can. Children can handle devastating events better than we think as long as we tell them the truth.

### ***Create a memory box.***

Years after a child loses a loved one they will begin to ask questions about the one that died. This is especially true of infants and toddlers. A memory box filled with pictures and mementos will help a child

experience what they missed because of someone's death

### ***Allow for a ceremony or ritual.***

Children need to be able to connect to the memory of the past. One proven way to do this is by allowing for periodic remembrance ceremonies such as setting off memory balloons or celebrating the birthday of a lost loved one every year. Some adults choose to try and forget the thoughts and memories of loved ones that have died. This isn't good for adults and especially not good for children. Children need to learn that even if someone dies, including themselves, they won't be forgotten.

### ***Watch for hidden issues such as behavior that isn't normal***

Since children have the same challenges dealing with grief as adults we can expect them to react to their grief in many ways. They will often express their grief through intense emotional reactions that are out of character. Some may feel guilty about a loved one's death as if they were somehow the cause. They may display unusual bouts of anger, sadness or depression. Schoolwork may suffer and normal friendships may be tested. This is normal but caring adults should watch them and don't assume that they are coping without any serious issues.

### ***Maintain schedules in their life***

This helps them to feel the security that life can return to some type of a normal routine. Children thrive with set schedules and routines so try and keep their life as close to normal as possible. Allow them to be around other people that they love. This will help to

provide more security and assurance that other people they love are still there.

### ***Allow them to participate with funeral decisions if they choose to.***

If they are old enough to consciously understand what has happened then discuss the funeral issues with them. Let them decide what they want to do. Children handle their grief differently just as adults do so some will want to stay away from the atmosphere of a funeral and a grave site. Others will want to be a part of everything even to the point of helping to make decisions. As adults we need to acknowledge and respect their input.

### ***Remember ... Even infants grieve.***

There is a notable quote passed around among those that deal with childhood grief that states “*any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve.*” An infant can tell when someone that they are attached to is gone. They may only feel that someone close is missing but they can still exhibit the symptoms of grief. In these situations they need extra comfort and security especially a lot of touching, holding and pampering.

Helping a child to grieve, and grieve well, is as important for a child's development as learning to read and write. May we all as adults not avoid our responsibility to walk with them as they travel their own grief journey.