

SIBLING GRIEF

By Dr. Dennis Klass

We would like to protect our children from the hard parts of life, but we can't. When death comes to our house, the surviving children are affected too, and we do well to think about how our kids respond and about how we can help them, and about how we can let them help us.

I

Before we talk about the special ways kids have of confronting death, there are some points we can remember as we relate to them.

1. Kids have to be allowed to respond to the death in their own way.

The loss they have experienced is different to them than the loss we have known. We have lost a child - the hope of our future, the part of ourselves which will carry on after us. They have lost a brother or sister with whom they had a very different relationship. An older brother could be the one who picked on them a lot, who seemed to get all the privileges, who protected them from other kids at school, who covered for them to Mom and Dad, or who tattled on them when they goofed off. Their younger brother or sister might be the one they had to stay and watch when they would rather be with their friends, who was the little brat that was always knocking them down when they wanted to be grown up, whom they had to share things with when they didn't want to, whom they could feel superior to and boss around, whom they could feel good about when they taught them a new place to go. That is a different loss than parents have experienced. So kids will respond to their loss, not to ours.

Beyond that, children are individuals who have, rather early, developed their own special ways of dealing with problematic reality. So they may not show their grief in ways we would like them to, or they may take different paths through their grief than we might if we were in their shoes.

As individuals, their grief may be on a different schedule than ours, so they may have different rhythms to their grief or spend a shorter or longer time in acute grief than we do

They may come up with different answers to the meaning of death, different religious answers, than we do.

We have to respect their individuality as well as respect and maintain the bond between us and them. We do our kids no favor when we want or expect them (whether we say it or not) to respond in ways that we would like. When we are down and the child is acting as if nothing is wrong, we do not help that child by making him feel guilty for not feeling at the moment as we do. If we need to talk, but the child does not seem interested, or cannot manage it at that time, we need to find ways of allowing him to be himself at the same time we remain true to ourselves.

2. In our grieving, we should not exclude the child.

Every semester I ask my students to write their earliest memory of death. The majority have a feeling of awe, wonder and mystery, but coupled with that is a feeling of being left out. It was something adults were not willing to talk about. It was the time when their parents were not around and they were left in the care of others who did not say much. It was the time when they went to strange places like hospitals or funeral homes and wakes and saw things they did not understand and about which they do not now remember being told. As a result, they now feel they did not have the information or the adult models to make sense of the event.

When we are hurting badly, we often want to withdraw into ourselves; yet if the kids are little, they make demands on us. We are deep in crying and are overwhelmed by the basic evil or nonsense of the universe, and the child wants a glass of water or the car keys. So our response to the child is likely to be inappropriate to him. We seem to be angry without reason or we seem not to be there when they need us, and so they feel estranged from us.

We can share our grieving with the child and let the child know that it is our grief and not he that is making us act this way. With little children, our withdrawing, anger, depression or whatever will probably be taken personally. They will assume it is something they have done and will spend a lot of energy acting on that false assumption. We can say, "I'm sorry. I was remembering your brother/sister, and it is very hard for me to be with you just now." Children can understand if we let them, but, especially when they are under ten, we cannot expect them to read our behaviour as adults can.

If we share how we are feeling and thinking, we give the child a great gift, for we have shown the child the depth of grief and also some possible ways grief can be resolved. Kids think, and sometimes because their minds are not cluttered by adult preconceptions, they come up with some pretty good insights. If we let them, they might even help us understand.

II

Researchers have given us some concepts which can help us understand how children grieve. We need to note, however, that there are no absolute ideas or moulds into which kids fall, just because they are one age or another. I want to talk about two areas: children's understandings of death; and their emotional response to death.

1. Children's understanding of death.

There is no age after about two years at which children do not understand what death is if they are given adequate explanation. But very young children are likely to be confused if we talk to them in contorted language. If cars have 'dead' batteries and fans yell "Kill the umpire" at the ball game, but a person has 'passed' or was 'lost', we should not be surprised if kids don't know what we are talking about.

Children up to about age seven may not seem to take death too seriously, because they don't understand that it is a real change or that it is not reversible. So the dead are in heaven or underground, but they eat and sleep and play there, just as they would have done if they were alive. A friend of mine was helping plan a birthday party for a four-year-old a few weeks after the child's mother had died. The girl said matter-of-factly, "My mother can't come, because she is dead". These children may not distinguish between deaths as adults do. One child comforted his grandfather after the death of his grandmother by saying the duck in his preschool died, so he understood just how Grandpa felt.

Children over seven years, however, share our adult conceptions about death and should be able to understand any explanation we give.

2. Children's emotional response to death.

For children under seven years (please understand, I only use these ages as rough estimates - kids develop faster and slower) the problem death presents is separation and the fear of separation, especially from the mother or primary care-giver. This fear of separation, especially after the death of a sibling, may be expressed by a clinging close, or perhaps a regression of

behaviour appropriate to much younger ages when the mother was more immediately involved with their physical activities, like eating, toileting or dressing. It can also express itself as a withdrawal and a determination not to need the parents.

At this age children have a real feeling of power in the world. The sun rises so they can have a day and goes down so they can have night. Words can also have a magic power, so to call someone a name or to damn him or to wish him dead has the same force as reality. If, therefore, a child has wished a sibling dead (as most of us have at some point), and then the sibling dies, the child may very well feel as if he/she caused the death.

By the way, we all have a good deal of the child left in us when grief is strong. I know of very few dying people who have not at some point thought their death was a punishment, and some parents can feel strongly that their words or wishes caused the death of the child.

From about seven to twelve (again, take the ages with a grain of salt) the problem with death is aggression. Death is personified as something that comes to get you. Our culture has a lot of such personifications - Darth Vader, the grim reaper, the bogey man. Death may very well be connected with the aggressive forces the child of this age is attempting to control within himself/herself, as society is putting strong pressure on him/her to act in socially acceptable ways. "If death came and got my brother or sister, it could very well be coming to get me."

objects in special places. We will sometimes find children acting in ways to ward off the reaper.

Again, I would note that the child in us is pretty strong as we grieve, and we may find these thoughts in our own mind.

Children over about twelve or thirteen respond to death much the same as adults do. The problem death presents especially strongly to some adolescents (though I see it strong too in parents who have lost children) is philosophical or religious. The fact is that death makes them ask serious questions about the justice of God or about the ultimate meaning of life. One of the answers to those questions, which can get support in adolescent music and literature, is a kind of nihilism, a belief that there is no meaning in life, so the individual might as well enjoy whatever fleeting pleasures the moment can offer. For other teenagers, the encounter with death can lead to some important and lifelong religious and political commitments.

Very often adolescents have difficulty expressing emotions connected with death. This may be because they find the encounter with death so frightening that they simply turn off the experience itself and so really don't feel it. It may also be that they are at an age when many strong and new feelings are inside them, and they have trouble sorting them out, and the calm exterior can be a cover for some pretty hard turmoil inside.

There has been some scholarly writing about prolonged psychological problems in children when they have not adequately resolved their grief. It is important to remember, when we hear such things, that most children are basically healthy and if given information and communication, can comprehend well. However, if we see major changes in the child's behaviour within 18 months after a significant death, it is possible that there are some serious death related problems at work. Changes which can be important can be in sleep habits, eating, associations with his friends, dropping grades and talk of suicide. Such problems are usually not the child's alone, and it is a good idea for the whole family to see a professional helper like a psychologist, trained clergyperson or counsellor.

But we should not assume that grief is a major problem for many kids. It is the same problem for them as it is for us. We recognize the child in us in the way our children face death. If we give



them the freedom to respond in their own way to a death of a sibling, and if we will share our grief with our surviving children, we can help them and have them help us.

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