

IF YOU ARE A PARENT

SUPPORTING THE CHILD THAT GRIEVES THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

We can't dissipate the sorrow a child feels when someone dies. What we can do, though, is support them in their bereavement instead of isolating them and abandoning them in their loneliness.

Words of a mother

The death of a parent, a sibling, a grandfather, a grandmother or some other beloved person is a painful event in the life of a child or adolescent. Those of us who are close to them often wonder as to what is the best way to help them. We ask ourselves, what does a child understand about death, how do they feel when they lose someone they love, how will this important loss affect their development as well as what should we say and how can we support them.

With this pamphlet we hope to be of assistance to parents and those who wish to support a bereaved child, so as to be able to listen and to understand the child's or adolescent's reactions and needs during this difficult period in their life

1. UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF DEATH

What do children understand about death?

Usually children are more familiar with the idea of death than we think. Death can be found in fairy tales, in their games and in their everyday life.

Very young children (of preschool age), though they realize the absence of an important person from their life, cannot understand the finality of death. They think the person who died is going to come back or that s/he is still alive somewhere, able to think and feel.

The children of school age understand that death is irreversible, but believe that it only happens to others.

Adolescents know that all humans – including themselves - are mortal. They are also capable of metaphysical or symbolic interpretations.

However, apart from age, what plays an important role in the understanding of the concept of death is the cognitive and emotional development of a child, their personality, the environment they live in and the life experiences they have had, relative to death.

2. GRIEF/ BEREAVEMENT

“GRIEVING IS THE SUM TOTAL OF PERSONAL REACTIONS TO THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE”

Do children grieve?

Yes, children do grieve. They are deeply affected by the death of a loved one. Sometimes we do not realize this because children grieve in a different way to adults.

How do children grieve?

Every child has their own way of grieving. There is no right and wrong way. Bereavement is a completely normal process as the child is trying to accept the reality of the loss and adjust to it.

Children grieve at intervals

As they can't bear the painful feelings for a long period of time, children grieve at intervals. So, while sad in one moment, they can be playing and laughing the next. That does not mean they don't care about the loss or that they have overcome it.

Grieving is a long-term process

Grieving is a long process with no definitive ending. Certain experiences at different stages of a child's development may rekindle painful feelings. Important changes in their cognitive development and their emotional and social life can bring bereavement back to the surface, giving children a possibility to find a new meaning in the loss they suffered.

Children express their sorrow through what they do rather than with words.

Since children's verbal abilities aren't very developed, they express their grief mainly through their play or drawings or through changes in their behavior, sleep patterns and eating habits, at home or at school.

Children find it hard to ask for support.

Usually close relatives are wrapped up in their own pain and therefore less available. Children themselves rarely seek support from their peers, since they are afraid they might be stigmatized or isolated because they differ from others.

3. SUPPORT AND NEEDS

“GRIEVING IS MANIFESTED THROUGH THE BODY, THE MIND, THE FEELINGS AND THE BEHAVIOR OF THE CHILD”

How do children express their grief?

Some of the most common –and perfectly normal– manifestations of bereavement that occur in children are:

- sadness
- outburst of anger or crying (sometimes for totally insignificant reasons)
- various fears (fear of separation from people they love, fear of the dark etc.)
- changes in sleep patterns and eating habits
- changes in behavior (isolation, introversion, aggressiveness, poor school performance, etc.)
- manifestations of previous developmental stages (thumb sucking, bedwetting, dependency on adults)
- intense longing and yearning for the deceased and constant thoughts regarding their death.
- guilt over the death of their loved one.
- relief after a long period of anxiety over the upcoming death
- physical symptoms (headaches, stomach discomfort, respiratory problems, allergy flare-ups etc.)

What are the needs of a child who is grieving?

- To **understand exactly** what happened to their loved one and why
- To be able to **express** their feelings over the loss
- To **keep the memory** of their loved one alive
- To feel that they **can get on with their life** and invest in other relationships
- To **receive support** from their environment throughout the process

How do we support a child who is grieving?

- By promptly providing reliable information using simple words.
- By encouraging them to express their feelings.
- By helping them to preserve the memory of their loved one.
- By supporting their participation in the family mourning.
- By ensuring continuity and stability in their life.
- By providing consistent and appropriate support on an ongoing basis.

4. NOTIFICATION

“IT IS NOT ONLY IMPORTANT WHAT WE SAY TO THE CHILD BUT HOW WE SAY IT”

How do we inform a child about the death of a loved one?

Notify the child as soon as possible after the event, do not conceal the incident.

Explain precisely and truthfully what happened and adapt your vocabulary to the child’s level of understanding. Hiding the truth or providing false information doesn’t protect children, it only creates confusion, fear, insecurity and misinterpretations. Silence makes the child feel alone and cut off from the rest of the family which can lead to emotional isolation and an inability to obtain needed support.

We carefully choose the words we are going to use

Use words like “died”, “death” and not ambiguous or vague expressions like “she went to heaven” or “God took him”, “ she’s gone”, “we lost him” etc. these expressions are usually misunderstood by preschool children who are unable to understand the finality of death. If a child is a bit older (e.g. school age), each family can have a discussion with him/her about their own religious, spiritual and philosophical beliefs regarding death.

Do not embellish the reality of death

The reality of death, though painful, does not change. Explain what happens when somebody dies by saying: “The body does not function anymore, his heart stopped beating, he doesn’t breathe or think or feel anything. Explain that at the funeral the body will be put in a box called a “coffin” and the coffin will be buried in the ground at the cemetery. Metaphysical interpretations are incomprehensible to very young children who understand things literally. Only if they ask “what happens after death” could you share with them your religious, spiritual or philosophical beliefs.

We listen carefully and answer their questions

We do not bombard the child with information. We give them time to express their feelings. We answer their questions and if there’s something we don’t know, we just say “I don’t know”. We provide the

information again and again, when they repeatedly ask about what happened, as they try to come to terms with the incident.

We tell the child that what happened is not their fault

We assure them nothing they did, thought or said (naughty behaviors, forbidden actions or thoughts) caused the death of their loved one. Also, we emphasize that there's nothing they could have done to prevent this death from happening.

Repeat the information and be prepared to explain again and again

Children might ask repeatedly about the details of the death or the absence of the loved one in an effort to come to terms with the facts. Give the same answers while cultivating a sense of trust. You can ask simple questions like "what have you not understood?"

Inform the child about what is going to happen from now on

Children worry about the future (who's going to take care of them, help them with their homework etc.). Talk about the changes that are going to take place in the family's life, as well as the habits that are going to remain the same.

5. EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS

"THE PAIN THAT IS SHARED IS HALF THE PAIN"

How can we encourage a child to express his/her feelings?

We let children express their feelings no matter what those are

It is important for the child to feel free to express what they are feeling. We must also respect their silence, when they choose not to share what they feel. Reassure the child that you will be available whenever they are ready to talk.

We show understanding and acceptance

We listen carefully without passing judgment or saying how the child "should" or "shouldn't" feel and think. Show understanding towards feelings of anger or negative thoughts the child might have.

Emphasize the fact that everything the child feels is normal

Even though the feelings are often painful and confused.

We share our own feelings and thoughts with the child.

We may cry with the child, if that is what we're feeling. Sharing an intimate moment may help them to express themselves and feel that they are not alone in their sorrow. At the same time the child becomes aware that you are acknowledging your own difficult feelings, as well as his, even though it is painful. Give time and space to yourself by asking other members of the family or teachers to help to

We reassure the child that we love him/her

We show our interest and love to every child –regardless of their age–with words, a hug or a caress. In this way we can minimize the intense feelings of insecurity that children, who are facing an important loss, often experience.

Acknowledge your own sorrow and request support

Give time and space to yourself. Ask for assistance from relatives, teachers, friends or a psychologist who can help you to cope with your child's needs.

6. KEEPING THE MEMORIES ALIVE

“THE FINAL DEATH COMES WITH FORGETTING”**How do we maintain the memories of a beloved person?****We refer to the person who died**

We don't stop the child from talking about him. We create an atmosphere where children feel they can be themselves.

We share the memories of the deceased with the child.

Talk about recollections together. Some memories are good and some are bad, just like in every relationship. We avoid the extreme idolization of the deceased.

We help the child find ways to keep the memory of their loved one alive

This can be done with an object that reminds her of him or an album of photographs of the loved one.

We allow the child to participate in the family's grief rituals, if she so wishes

The death of a family member concerns the whole family and there is no reason why the child should be excluded from the family mourning. However the participation of children in grief rituals requires good preparation. Explain to them in a simple way what the funeral or the memorial service is and what is going to happen during the ceremony. Ask them whether they want to attend the ceremony and, in case they do, make sure they are with someone who can support them and meet their needs as they occur.

We remember anniversaries, birthdays and other special days

On birthdays, holidays, name days or the anniversary of the death of their loved one, the family usually has emotional upheaval as the absence of the loved one is felt more intensely. In this case, the family can have a discussion with all the family members present, to decide together how they want to honor the memory of their loved one and how they will spend those momentous days.

7. HOW TO PROMOTE THE STABILITY OF FAMILY LIFE?

“WHEN EVERYTHING AROUND US IS CHANGING THE STABLE FAMILY VALUES ARE A SOURCE OF SECURITY”

Maintain the rules of discipline and behavior

That applied before the death in the family. Rules and limits provide a feeling of safety and security when everything in the child’s life has changed.

Maintain – as much as possible - a stable environment and life conditions

Avoid the immediate change of school or house, as it creates a feeling of discontinuity in the child’s life and causes new losses for him/her to have to cope with. Notify the school of the loss that the child has experienced so that the teachers can appropriately support the child and recognize any special needs.

Allow the child to remain a child

Children often have the tendency to be protective of their loved ones and they may have the desire to take the role of the person who died. Do not encourage this tendency.

Encourage the child to go on with his/her life

Children often express the desire to continue normally with extracurricular activities. This is a natural desire and stems from the need for security and stability in their life. For that reason we encourage them to take part in social activities, excursions, celebrations and the school life, as soon as they are ready, so that they can return to their normal pace without feeling like they are betraying the person who died.

The golden rule of support in those difficult times is to LISTEN TO THE CHILD

We support the child on a constant basis

Bereavement is a long process and for that reason it is important for the child to have ongoing support from family members and other significant people in his/her life.

8. WORRYING SIGNS

“PREVENTION IS THE BEST CURE”

What should we be worried about regarding the child or adolescent who is grieving?

- Extended absence of any manifestation of grief.
- Extended period of avoidance of play and/or interaction with their friends and peers.
- Persistent accusations against themselves or others whom they think are responsible for the death.
- Persistent serious problems in school performance or in the relationships with their schoolmates and teachers.
- Complete identification with the person who died and systematic attempts to fill the void that the death created in the family.

- Prolonged disturbances of eating and sleeping patterns (bulimia, recurring nightmares)
- Intense and prolonged physical discomfort or symptoms which are similar to the symptoms experienced by the deceased person
- Self-destructive behavior (drugs, bulimia, anorexia, accident-prone behavior) and suicidal thoughts

In these cases you should contact a child bereavement counseling service or a specialist who has experience with child bereavement issues.

Which children are more vulnerable to problems with grief?

- Children who already had mental or emotional or behavioral problems before the death of the loved one
- Children who have experienced other losses in the past that have not been addressed (another death, divorce, abuse)
- Children who have experienced a violent or sudden death of a loved one under traumatic conditions (suicide, murder, traffic accident)

Where can you find support?

The serious illness or the death of a loved one is just the beginning of a very difficult period for a child. Do not hesitate to ask for support and advice before difficulties or problems arise. Remember that "Prevention is the best therapy". A discussion with a mental health bereavement specialist can facilitate the adjustment to the loss of a loved one for both the child and the family.

Contact Merimna's Childhood Bereavement Counseling Center in Athens or in Thessaloniki or you can contact a Pediatric Mental Health Center in your area.

The specialized services offered at Merimna's Childhood Bereavement Counseling Center are of a supportive nature and are provided to the following populations:

- The Children and Adolescents (up to 18 yrs.) who are facing serious illness or the death of a loved one.
- The Families of these children and adolescents, as well as other adults who may have an important role in their lives.
- To education professionals and to schools
- To health professionals who work with children and adolescents

- To communities who have experienced an event causing multiple deaths. (due to a natural or man-made disaster or an accident)

For educators and school communities Merimna has a comprehensive information packet entitled: “Life Losses – Bridges of Support” (Only available in Greek language at this time)

For more information and support you can contact “Merimna”the Organization for the Care of Children and Families who are Facing Illness and Death”

Email; administration@merimna.org.gr

www.merimna.org.gr

Childhood Bereavement Counseling Center – Athens

Telephone support line: 210 646 3622

Address: Papanikoli 2A, Halandri, 15232 Athens

Email: athens.support@merimna.org.gr

Childhood Bereavement Counseling Center – Thessaloniki

Telephone support line: 2310 510 010

Address: Fragkon 13, 54626 Thessaloniki

Email: Thessaloniki.support@merimna.org.gr