

# HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE

Darcie D. Sims, Ph.D., CHT, CT, GMS

**PAIN KNOWS NO AGE!** Understanding how a child perceives events and how one reacts to change will enable an adult to help a child develop appropriate coping mechanisms. We must be **guided by the child**. Allow the child to become the teacher. Go with the child as he explores the various dimensions of hurt, loss and grief. Be directed by the child. Learn to listen and to hear, not only the pain, but the confusion, the isolation, the loneliness, the anger, the guilt, the sadness, the memories as well. Do not attempt to guide, but rather, become a companion on the journey and **together we can search of the magic wand of healing.**



# HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF



- Be available
- Listen (with your ears, eyes, and heart)
- TOUCH appropriately (a hug can say I care)
- Face your own feelings of loss and grief. Share them if you like



- Be open and honest with feelings. Create an atmosphere of acceptance that invites questions, fosters confidence and love
- Encourage expressions of grief (talking, writing, yelling, painting, etc)
- Provide appropriate places to express grief
- Acknowledge the reality that grief HURTS. Do not attempt to rescue the child (or yourself) from hurt. Work *through* the pain.
- Provide a quiet, private place for when the child needs to be alone
- Respect a child's need to grieve. Almost anything can trigger grief
- Understand that priorities change. What you think is important may not be considered by the child as such
- Realize that grief causes difficulty in concentrating. Children often experience a shortened attention span. School work is often affected.
- Do not isolate or insulate children from grief. Grief is a **NORMAL** and **NATURAL REACTION TO LOSS** (of any kind)
- Understand that other losses often accompany the identified loss. A change in residence, caretaker, school or peer group all add to the grief experience. Loss of trust often compounds grief.
- Try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensations. He still needs to feel a part of his peer group and should be expected to function accordingly.
- Temper your expectations with kindness and understanding. Continue to expect function.

- Set realistic goals with the child concerning his behavior, school performance and homework. Help the child create his own routines if necessary.
- Help the child find a supportive peer group.
- Help a child's friends learn to be supportive.
- Become part of a caring team by establishing lines of communication with everyone involved with the child. Keep each other informed about the child's progress.
- Understand grieving children are often "busy" with the tasks of establishing a new identity. WHO AM I NOW? Becomes a major concern. Family roles may change as well as identities. This self-search often overshadows all other concerns for many weeks and months.
- Know that grief lasts far longer than anyone expects. It may take months or even years before a child displays signs of the full impact of a loss.
- Maintain a daily routine if possible. Continuity becomes a safety net for grieving children. The continuity of attending school daily, being required to perform certain tasks in and out of school and having a social routine provide children with some security and sense of stability in a topsy turvey world.
- Have resources about grief, loss and change available.
- Understand that children and young people will continue to deal with the losses/changes they experience as they grow and mature. They will NOT GET OVER IT, but they can learn to GROW THROUGH the grief and discover that LOVE NEVER GOES AWAY.
- Continue to be available long after you think they "should be over it." Continue to reach out and care, just as you do now!



We DO NOT LOSE people. They die, but the love we shared with them can never be destroyed. They are a **THREAD IN OUR FABRIC**, an ongoing influence in our life. We choose how that influence will be addressed, but we will continue to have a relationship with everyone who has made any kind of impact on our life. It is neither “pathological” nor inappropriate for any one to think, speak or relate to someone who has died or left us in any manner. Only when such relationships begin to replace all other kinds of associations, does this signal concern. **THE PEOPLE WE LOVE WILL ALWAYS BE A PART OF OUR LIFE.**

**WE DON'T STOP LOVING SOMEONE JUST BECAUSE THEY DIED!**

Although painful things do happen, it is not the end of the world for long. It is not possible nor even desirable to eliminate all stressful events from the lives of our children. Children learn to cope with loss by moving through the anxiety they feel with the help of supportive adults.

As positive experiences in dealing with loss accumulate, we develop the ability to see ourselves as competent, strong, worthwhile individuals and to see life as a challenge we can meet.

Yet, **LOSS HURTS!**

We cannot find words to soothe the hurt. There aren't any! We cannot shield our children from the twists and turns of living. We cannot protect them from experiencing life.

We can, however, **BUILD SUPPORTS AND SAFETY NETS**, not only for our children but for ourselves as well. That requires love and faith, strength and support. Hurt and pain have their lessons and we cannot rob ourselves of the richness of the tapestry that hurt and love weave together.

To eliminate one from the loom is to break the thread and steal away the fabric.

The gifts within love are obvious. We do not dispute them.

The gifts within hurt are as equal. I could not understand light if I never knew darkness. I could not sing sweet if I had never known bitter. I could not smile if I had not cried.

Who am I now can become a challenge rather than a despair if we allow ourselves to grow through the triumphs and the trials.

**NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP  
I PRAY THE LORD MY SOUL TO KEEP  
TO KEEP ME SAFE ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT  
TO WAKE ME IN THE MORNING LIGHT**

How much safer it is to go to sleep with a dream, a memory, knowing that we DO NOT LOSE PEOPLE in our lives. They may die or go away, but THEY ARE A PART OF US FOREVER .... A THREAD IN OUR FABRIC, MAKING UP WHO WE ARE.

**WE CANNOT PROTECT OUR CHILDREN FROM THE RAIN,  
BUT WE CAN GO TOGETHER IN SEARCH OF THE PARADE!**

***YOU ARE THE PART OF LOVE THAT NEVER GOES AWAY***

