

Junior Secondary Guidance Officer – Anna Willis

Supporting Teen's Through Loss And Grief



In western culture death, and diseases such as dementia and cancer, seem to be hidden away, not generally discussed – because 'it won't happen to us'. Inevitably, though, the unthinkable will occur. How can we help our children cope with loss and grief, when a loved one starts to fail in mind or body, or dies?

I have a particular parenting approach, carefully chosen. As our family faces the passing of adored grandparents, these are the skills I'm employing. (Further resources are listed at the end of this article.)

Look after ourselves

As with the oxygen mask in a plane, we need to take care of ourselves in order to be there for our children. Acknowledge our own pain. Seek support from another adult, such as a partner, trusted friend, or counsellor. Understand the process of grieving for both our self, and our children.

Empathise with active listening. avoid 'roadblocks to communication'.

Active Listening (emotion coaching) means we tentatively guess what our children are feeling, and why. We then empathically state back our understanding of their experience. When they are upset, Active Listening helps us to be there with them, to hold their emotional hand. 'You're feeling sad about grandpa dying. You're really going to miss him.'

Children may feel a myriad of new or painful emotions, such as loss, helplessness, sadness, guilt, or fear. Naming those emotions helps feelings to pass. Your child will learn that they can get through the bad times – they won't stay sad forever. Try to avoid roadblocks, such as minimising what your child is feeling. Even reassuring them may not always be helpful. After all, we both know it won't be all right – Grandma is not coming back to cuddle them tomorrow.

Understand that their behaviour may change because they are grieving.

Remember that as we grieve, our children will also grieve. They have not only lost their special person, but also (for a time) the 'normal' Mum or Dad they've known for their entire lives. Our children may not have the words to express their grief, so may behave in a way that indicates their distress.

They may begin to act out of character. They may become clingy, silent, angry or aggressive. They may start wetting the bed, or have trouble falling asleep. They are not 'getting at you', and it's important not to take their behaviour personally. They are simply letting you know that their needs, such as certainty or security, have been threatened, and they require help to cope. Punishing children at times like this (such as using time-out) can increase your child's distress. This is a time they most need your support. They need to be connected to you, not isolated from you.



Be honest – our children need to know

We might want to protect our children, by keeping them out of conversations regarding our relative's illness or death. However, our children will hear the whispers, wonder about the closed doors. If we don't share the facts, then they may imagine things – which could be far worse than reality. They may feel hurt and confused that they've been left out. Try sharing relevant details in age-appropriate discussion.

Use I-messages when talking about your own feelings

When someone close to us is ill, or dies, we will grieve. We will slosh through emotion after emotion. Sadness, fear, devastation, anger. Unless we tell them, our children will not know what we are feeling, or why we are reacting. They will just see our tears, feel our silence, or hear us yell at them for no apparent reason. They won't know the aching pain behind our actions.

Let your children see that you are 'owning' your own feelings, and it is helping you to cope. This will model coping strategies for them. Try telling them what is happening for you in I-Messages (again, age appropriate). Avoid the third person ('Mummy/Daddy is feeling . . .'). 'I'm sorry sweetheart. I'm just finding it difficult to concentrate right now, because I'm thinking of how much I'm missing Grandpa'. You may wish to seek professional help if you are concerned about your own, or your child's, wellbeing.

Resources and further reading

- Beyond Blue: 1300 22 46 36
- Kid's helpline: 1800 55 1800
- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: <https://www.grief.org.au/>.

– Larissa Dann

Larissa has taught P.E.T. for over 17 years, and utilised the P.E.T. skills and concepts as a parent for more than 20 years. Her website, www.parentskills.com.au, further articles and resources on parenting.