

## **Lessons Learned from the Experts – Grieving Children**

In 2001, eight-year-old Molly's mom called me one fall day to ask if I could help her daughter who was having difficulty dealing with the suicide of her dad in July. When I replied "I am sorry, there are no resources for grieving children in the Montreal area", her mom asked me "Well, what am I going to do? Who can help her? Who can help us?"

This conversation was the impetus that culminated in the founding of The Grief Centre in Montreal in January 2002. My partner, Yvonne Clark, and I each have a professional interest in grieving. Yvonne's background is in social work and she is a marriage and family therapist specializing in loss and grief. My background is in nursing and grief education. We met when we were pursuing our Masters' degrees at McGill University when we realized we were each developing a passion for working in the then relatively new area of grief support and education. For ten years we pondered the value of offering a place for families to grieve together and finally decided to put our dream into practice in 2002.

Yvonne and I have adjoining offices; while Yvonne's office is comfortable with a sofa and chairs, mine is a playroom modeled on The Dougy Center For Grieving Children and Families in Portland, Oregon.\* I have a Whack Wall and punching bag in the Mad Corner, puppets, a rice table, a Talk corner with big cushions to sink into, play figures, vehicles, animals, dinosaurs, an Arts and Crafts Corner and a basket of soft balls to squeeze and play with.

We give families a safe, confidential, non-judgmental place to grieve together but also separately because children and adults have different needs in grief. Children for instance tend less to sit and talk, but will actively engage in play and creative activities to help sort out their feelings.

Talking to children about death and dying teaches them about life and living. At The Grief Centre, we meet with the whole family for about half an hour. Then we separate and Yvonne works with the adults giving them time for their own grief and also helping them to understand children's grief, while I work with the children in the playroom. At the end of a session, we all meet together again and discuss anything that might have come up in the separate sessions. We believe in openness and honesty and encourage parents to be truthful and direct when discussing death related issues. We believe that parents play a key role in modeling grieving behavior for their children and we have learned that it is easier for children to be included in family grief than excluded. Although we do not choose the experiences of loss for our children, we can provide a safe place for them to work through their feelings and teach them healthy coping skills.

Grief counselor Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Ft. Collins, Colorado wisely notes that "Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve". Indeed an infant whose parent has died may experience regressive behaviors, irritability and eating and sleeping irregularities.



Although Piaget's early work (1929) established a framework for the cognitive development of children, he did not include grieving children nor discuss death with his subjects. However, his classification of the different stages of psychological development has been widely used (Goldman 1994, Wolfelt 1996, Corr 1995) as a basis for examining how children's perceptions of death develop. Although every bereaved child grieves in a unique way, the child's developmental level does affect his/her grief. The meaning of death changes as the child passes through different developmental stages.

Dr. Nancy Boyd Webb, a clinical social worker and professor at Fordham University includes exhaustive research on how children's perceptions of death develop in her book Helping bereaved children: A Handbook for Practitioners (2005). Webb concludes that most children achieve the knowledge that death is irreversible, inevitable and universal by 7 or 8 years of age. Some researchers have found that children understand the concepts of universality, nonfunctionality and irreversibility as early as 5 years of age (Speece, Brent, 1984) while others Lonetto (1980) concluded that "death for the child from six to eight years is personified, externalized. . . and not yet finalized".

It is useful to use an age related guideline only as an approximation of development. We must remember that children do not develop at the same rate or in the same way. In addition to the level of cognitive development, other variables which affect children's perceptions of death are their life experiences, individual personalities, patterns of communication and support, and socialization or culture..

The following guideline offers a broad overview of how children's perceptions of death develop.

*Birth – 2 years*

Children of this age will realize loss as an absence. They will sense the anxiety and sadness of those around them.

*Pre-schoolers (3-6 years)*

At this age, children view death as temporary and reversible. They ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to gain understanding. Children may think their own thoughts can cause death (magical thinking).

*Grade schoolers (7-11 years)*

Children of this age begin to understand that death is final. They are very curious and interested in the biological reasons for dying. They tend to personify death as a monster, bogeyman or ghost.

*Adolescents (12 years +)*

Adolescents understand mortality but in general feel it relates to others.



## **Tasks of Grief**

Children need to work through four tasks of grief to help them come to terms with the death of a special person. Dr. Sandra Fox, who created the Good Grief Program in Boston in 1980 has identified these as Understanding, Grieving, Commemorating, and Carrying on with life.

### ***Understanding***

Young children understand the simple explanation that we die because our bodies stop working – our hearts don't beat anymore, we don't breathe, we don't feel, we don't move. At the Grief Centre, we tend to say “*very, very, very* old or sick or hurt” to reinforce that we don't necessarily die simply because we are old or sick or hurt. Where relevant, family and religious or cultural beliefs can help give more meaning to the physical explanation of death, such as in the following:

“Grandpa died because he was very, very, very sick and his heart stopped beating. His body doesn't work anymore. In our family we believe that the spirit of the person who dies goes to heaven.”

“Jamie died because he was hit by a car and his body was very, very, very badly hurt. He died because his body stopped working, his heart stopped beating. We believe that Jamie is now an angel in heaven and he will always watch over us.”

Tyson was 11 years old when his mother died. The adults in his father's family blamed Tyson for his mom's illness and death. He had carried the burden of responsibility with him and became weighted down with guilt. He was unable to get himself up in the morning to attend school for he had no energy to accept responsibility for his actions. It was only at 15 when he found a safe place to talk about his mom that he was able to understand that leukemia is not caused by the stress of parenting and he was not responsible for his mom's death. As he was able to work through some of his feelings he was comforted by activities that helped him to honor his mom's memory, activities such as making a candle, putting together a memory scrapbook or a mother's day card.

It was important for Molly to understand that her daddy chose to end his life for his own reasons, that it was not her fault and that he loved her very much. Molly wanted to know how he had killed himself. He had taken an overdose of alcohol and pills. After we talked about what he had done, she played with the doll family at the rice table, creating a tableau using the daddy doll, a small bottle for the beer, and grains of rice for the pills. It is very normal for children to act out or draw the scenario of the death. This is healthy expression, helping to get “what is inside outside”.

### ***Grieving***

Alphonso, 6 years old, was angry around the first Father's Day after his dad had died. His mom reported that he was acting out at home and was not paying attention in school. When I talked with him about his feelings of missing his dad, he acknowledged them and calmly continued playing in the rice table. I think validating feelings helps children to feel valued and frees them up to “let some of the feelings go.”

It is important to say the words “death, died, dead, killed”. When discussing suicide with young children, we need to be open and honest because it takes the power out of the words to say them directly. We can’t “fix” grieving children. It’s okay not to have words to say to them. Five-year-old Ralph had me write on his target “I’m mad – it’s not fair” that his daddy had died suddenly while curling. What could I possibly say to help? I could only validate “No, it’s not fair.”

Initially when the grief is “fresh” it may be too difficult for the child to talk about memories. Six-year-old Simon was told the truth when his mother suicided – “Mommy was very, very, very mixed up in her head and made a decision to kill herself. It’s not your fault and she loved you very much, she just was mixed up.” At first it was easier for him to talk about feelings than things he used to do with his mom. He was able to acknowledge feeling “mad” and threw stuffed animals around, used the punching bag, tore up a phone book and “helped get the mad out”. He then calmed down and played quietly on the floor with figures. Validating the normality of all feelings in a non-judgmental way somehow helps to honor the child’s reactions.

### ***Commemorating***

Children need to find ways to honor the memories of their special people who have died.

Jason’s dad was reluctant to take his 10-year-old son to the cemetery on the first anniversary of his wife’s death. However Jason wanted to visit her grave and had some ideas for honoring his mom’s memory. He remembered she had loved red roses so he asked his dad if they could buy some; then he wanted to make a Memory Candle to light at the grave; and finally he wanted to buy some blue Trident gum because that had been his mom’s favorite flavor. He proudly organized these commemorative objects at the cemetery and took a picture to show me. It was still very difficult to deal with his mom’s death but he knew what he needed to do to honor her memory.

### ***Going on***

Children intuitively know that it is okay to have fun even when someone special has died. They also seem to know that having fun does not mean they miss or love their person any less. Adults have a very hard time separating these feelings and are often plagued with guilt when they smile or laugh after a loved one has died. We need to separate the feelings of missing the person from activities of “life carrying on” which is the reality for the grievers. Children are much better at this than adults!

### **Fearfulness**

Most children worry if one parent has died that something might happen to the remaining parent. Parents can’t promise that nothing will happen and they will live forever; however, they can tell children they are healthy today and if anything changes, they will tell them. This is usually enough to allay the fear because young children are very egocentric and are more concerned about the present rather than future safety. I offer children a “Worry Box” and cards to write their fears and worries on. Some of them like to read others’ concerns and some like to write



their own worries, such as “I am worried that my mom will die too”.

## Revisiting grief

Because children progress through different developmental stages as they grow, they view death differently as they age. Frankie was 9 years old when his dad died suddenly after open-heart surgery. We worked with the family initially and then did not hear from them for several years. When Frankie was 14 years old, 5 years after his dad’s death, his mom called to request an appointment because Frankie was “very angry”. I invited Frankie to make targets about his anger “I am mad that. . .” His targets included

“I am mad that he won’t get to see me run”. Frankie had discovered a new talent as he entered high school and his dad would not be there to see him race.

“I am mad that he can’t take me to the Olympics”. Frankie’s dad had promised to take him to his native country of Greece for the Olympics.

“I am mad that he can’t sign my tests”. His dad was not here to see his progress in school.

“I am mad that all the other kids have dads and I don’t”.

Frankie was revisiting his grief as he progressed through another developmental stage. He spent ten minutes hitting the targets on the Whack Wall with plasticene to “help get the mad out”. When he had had enough he was ready to leave. Mom called in a couple of weeks to report that Frankie was back to his old self and the family was planning to honor dad’s memory at the upcoming fifth anniversary of his death by everyone taking the day off to have a picnic at the grave site.

## Lessons learned from the experts - grieving children

If we give children a safe, confidential, non-judgmental place they will lead us on their grief journeys and teach us what they need. I have a Memory Door at The Grief Centre and invite children to write something about their special person who died. Molly was the first to write on the Memory Door, eight months after her dad’s death. She wrote “I remember his hair is soft and smells good.” As she worked out her feelings about her dad’s death she was able to let them go so that there was room for gentle memories as well. After all, her daddy will always be her daddy and the best that can happen is that she will integrate this experience in a healthy way, revisiting her grief as she proceeds through the developmental stages into adulthood and finding a place in her heart and soul for his memory.



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\*The Dougy Center is a freestanding house that offers grief support to children, teens and families when someone special has died. Founded in 1982 in Portland, Oregon, the house's layout with a different room dedicated to a different aspect of grieving (the Volcano Room, Splatter Room, Talk Room, etc.) has become a model for grief centers throughout the world.

### References

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