

HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS WITH DEATH OR TRAGEDY

By Dr. Robin F. Goodman

When children experience the death of someone special or deal with tragic events, it can be difficult to know what to say and how to help children. The following suggestions are to help guide adults.

Talk to your child: Start with a general statement or question then listen to what they say or ask rather than assume. Look for opportunities to check in more than once.

Be honest: Use age appropriate language, share basic information, and correct misinformation. It's OK to say "I don't know" and focus on what you do know and what is in everyone's control.

Reassure: Use routine and structure to reassure children they will be all right, you are all right, and things in their world will continue. Getting back to school and activities, even if they do not feel the same provides predictability. Remind them of the people who take care of them and how to get help.

Return to the familiar: Getting back to familiar tasks and distracting or even fun activities provides balance and perspective.

Use media sense: If the event was in the news, turn off or limit TV viewing especially for little ones. Monitor what news and social media children and teens are watching or using and discuss it together.

Model coping: Adults have feelings and can help children by modeling appropriate ones and especially how to make choices to cope with upset or sadness in healthy ways.

Encourage expression: Children may more easily express their thoughts and feelings in pictures, music, play and poems. Be careful not to press for details but rather validate how they feel and problem solve ways to feel better.

Stay connected: Being connected to others – friends, family, a faith community, pets – can be especially healing and powerful when feeling upset, overwhelmed and alone.

Provide comfort: Hugs – given and received - help everyone, young and old.

Find the good: Look for stories of hope. Cope with kindness. When able, be the hope – reach out a hand, offer help, care for others day to day.

Realize reactions change over time: In the first days and weeks it is expected that children will not be themselves. They may experience a range of feelings; sadness, worry, anger, guilt, which may be more or less intense. Different sights, sounds, smells, things may remind them of what happened. Problems with sleeping, eating, activity level and behavior at home, school, elsewhere may occur but subside over time. If concerned, and things are not getting better after a few months, check in with a counselor.

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