

Letter to the editor

Discussing the Death of a Loved One With a Child

By Brad Leary, LCSW

Often after the loss of a loved one, children cannot verbalize or articulate their feelings or emotions. Parents are sometimes unaware of normal childhood grief responses and find it confusing and difficult to discuss these issues with their child. At the Community Grief & Counseling Center, a program of Hospice of the Valley, we often receive phone calls asking questions such as, "Is it okay for my child to see their dying father or mother?" "Is it okay for my child to attend the funeral?" These are very important questions and we hope that the following information will be helpful to you, especially in light of the recent tragedy in Newtown, CT.

Communicate With Your Child about Death

When we avoid talking about something that is obviously upsetting, children often hesitate to bring up the subject or ask questions about it. While not all our answers about death may be comforting, we can share what we truly believe. Where you have doubts an honest, "I just don't know the answer to that one," may be more comforting than an explanation which is not believable. Children sense doubts. A non-defensive and accepting attitude may help them feel better about the not knowing.

Open Communication Involves:

- Being sensitive to children's desires to communicate when they are ready
- Avoid inhibiting their attempts to communicate; offer them honest explanations when you are obviously upset
- Listening to and accepting their feelings
- Not stifling their questions by telling them they are too young
- Finding brief and simple answers that are appropriate to their questions and not overwhelming them with too many words or too much information

General Guidelines for Helping Children With Grief

- If a child is afraid to attend a funeral, do not force them to go. Rather, offer to create a personalized memorial with them, planting a tree, lighting a candle, making a book of memories of the loved one, etc.
- Give children permission to show their feelings. Grief may come in waves and present itself in many different ways, from anger to sadness to shock, guilt and relief. Children often grieve in blocks of time, using play to resolve feelings or to take a break from intense grieving.
- Children may feel the need to protect their parents from the intensity of emotion the child is experiencing, stating "I'm fine" when they are not. After the death of a parent, a child may feel that they are losing both parents, as the surviving parent is preoccupied with their own grief.
- Recognize that children may regress in their behavior, reverting to previously "safe" activities, such as sucking thumbs, requesting to sleep in a parent's bed, having toileting accidents, etc.

Needs of a Grieving Child

- To receive information that is clear and understandable at their development level
- To be reassured that their basic needs will be met by a caring adult
- To be reassured by caring adults when they have questions about death, afterlife, or related issues
- To be able to have and express their own thoughts and behaviors, especially when different from significant adults
- To maintain age-appropriate activities and interests; to receive help with "age-appropriate understanding of grief"
- To say good-bye and memorialize the deceased

Brad Leary, LCSW, is the Director of Social Services & Counseling at Hospice of the Valley of Northern California—Silicon Valley’s preeminent non-profit provider of hospice, palliative care and grief counseling services. Leary has over fifteen years of healthcare experience with an emphasis in hospice and grief counseling, and is responsible for the day-to-day operations and strategic development of Hospice of the Valley’s social work and spiritual care services and Community Grief & Counseling Center. Leary represents Hospice of the Valley in collaboration with Santa Clara University’s Markkula Center for Applied Ethics in the Healthcare Ethics Internship Program. He is an active member of the Association for Death Education and Counseling and the National Association of Social Workers.

For information about Hospice of the Valley and the Community Grief & Counseling Center, visit hospicevalley.org and for community resources for caregivers and families, visit seriousillness.org/santaclaracounty, or call 1.408.559.5600.



(Left) Kristina Gatto, LMFT, uses art therapy to help children express their grief.



(Center) Debra Melmon, LMFT, plants a garden with children so they can understand the cycle of life.