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How Children Grieve

Kids work through many of the same emotional stages that adults do when a loved one dies: numbness, denial, anger, guilt, sadness and, eventually, acceptance. Because they don't always understand the concept of death and may not be able to articulate their feelings, their grief is often expressed in nonverbal ways, depending on their age.

BIRTH THROUGH 2 YEARS

- Cry a lot or become fussy
- Develop stomach or bowel problems or have trouble sleeping
- Clinging, whining and other signs of anxiety tend to become more pronounced

3 THROUGH 5 YEARS

- Revert to babyish behavior: thumb sucking, bed-wetting, or demanding a bottle (When children act in this manner as a result of a death, adults need to indulge them.)
- Talk as if the deceased will return

6 TO 10 YEARS

- Just beginning to understand death is final
- Curious about details (how the person died, what happens to the body afterward)
- Quiet children may become aggressive and lash out at others
- Others might withdraw for fear of being abandoned again
- Shorter attention spans, lack of energy, sickness, insomnia, or pleas to stay at home

10 AND UP

- Especially tough on this age because kids this age are going through so many physical and emotional changes anyway
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigued all the time
- Begin engaging in risky behaviors (Rash acts like these are usually a cry for attention or an expression of their own tentative desire to stop living and join the deceased.)

I-CART

Indiana Crisis Assistance Response Team

DISCUSSING TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Healing from trauma is not serendipitous; it does not simply occur with the passing of time or because children are inherently resilient. There is, in fact, nothing simple about childhood trauma. When ignored, the memories and distress do not go away. (Monahan, 1993)

Talking with children about traumatic events is beneficial in helping them move beyond the event. Adults also have reactions that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The following suggestions and questions can be beneficial in the crisis intervention process for both children and adults. The questions and discussion can be adjusted for all age groups. Giving children and adults the opportunity to discuss an event through these types of questions can greatly reduce the impact and/or preoccupation with the event. The crisis intervention process and protocol helps individuals:

1. **Develop a sense of safety and security** ...reminding them that they are safe and connecting them with others during the discussion will help develop this feeling
2. **Ventilate** their feelings and reactions and have those feelings and reactions **validated** by hearing the reactions of others
3. **Help predict** what other future reactions may be, both positive and distressing and help prepare for those reactions

Discussion Hints:

1. Anger and reactions: let individuals know that anger is a common reaction.
2. Normalize and affirm a broad range of reactions. . Affirm that almost any reaction or feeling that they might have is not unusual given the magnitude of the situation. Affirm that different people react in different ways. They may experience changes in:
 - a. Physical, cognitive, behavioral, emotional and spiritual domains
 - b. Differences in sleeping, eating, behaviors, concentrating, etc.
 - c. Short-term memory, attention, processing and recent learning is often impaired when a traumatic event has occurred. Disorganization and confusion may occur.
3. Facilitate the discussion: Ask questions only to facilitate the flow of discussion
4. Clarify what is being said
5. Echo words or phrases that are used in the discussion
6. Find new or alternative words that repeat or enhance what is being said
7. Summarize and indicate how common the reactions are
8. Give accurate information...if you are hearing things that are not known to be true...talk about the importance of reacting to what is known and not responding to rumors
9. Personal values and beliefs...keep personal values, beliefs, biases and judgments to yourself and avoid imposing them on others. . If pressed indicate that there will be all type of reactions voiced by individuals
10. Reflect back or repeat what the individual has told you
11. Accept feelings, fears, and concerns. Acceptance helps keep these out in the open