

QUESTION: How can I help my child through the death of his grandfather?

ANSWER: When a child experiences the death of someone close, parents need to seize this opportunity not only to help the child, but to strengthen the parent-child relationship. Invite your child to mourn. Be present as he/she embraces the pain of loss. Shielding a child too much will prevent healing.

1. Realize that grief is a process. Children move through this process at different rates. They emerge as different people. They will ask questions again and again (They are trying to sort out feelings and the new reality). Don't get frustrated or angry; be patient, gentle, honest and consistent with your words and actions (Invite them to mourn).
2. Children have limited vocabularies and may not have the words to express how they feel. They may have ambivalent feelings about the situation. Tell them you, too, have mixed and confused feelings. Tell them it is OK to cry, and it's OK to have happy moments. Draw them out by using conversation starters like: "I bet you might feel..." or "Do you ever feel..." etc.
3. Give grieving children lots of meaningful touch...hugs, kisses, pats and snuggles.
4. Do your best to keep their new world as secure and routine as possible, knowing that their world has changed. It will never be quite the same as it was. "Getting back to normal" means a different normal from what it was (Life is different now!).
5. Realize that your efforts might not bring immediate success. Walk with your child through his/her grief.
6. Grief/mourning is a spiritual time. Model prayer and Bible reading. Pray out loud with children often and with confidence. Don't be afraid of difficult God-related questions. Often, children are very disappointed with God.
7. Create opportunities for children to remember significant times with the deceased person. Use photo albums, memories, books, movies and memorabilia. Laugh and cry together.
8. Understand how your own grief might hinder the helping relationship you have with your child. Consider enrolling your child in a peer grief group.
9. Expect your child's grief feelings to reoccur as various events of life remind your child of the death event.
10. Surround your child with a caring community made up of extended family and close friends.
11. Remember that time does not heal unless grief is expressed.
12. Don't underestimate the power of your presence in Christ's name! You are the touch, voice and ears of Christ to your child.

13. Grief is not so much something a child "gets over," as it is something a child integrates into his/her life. Life is different after a significant loss. "Normal" is different after loss. The child is different after loss.

14. Provide the opportunity for your child to experience the ceremony and ritual of death...funeral, viewing, wake etc. These are difficult but extremely therapeutic.

Many people have the expectation that once a person "works through" her grief, she will return to "her old self." I don't agree. A significant loss changes the person forever. Consider a widow married 56 years...how can she ever "return to her old self" after her husband dies? She can reconcile the loss, get to a point where her mood is generally good, learn to live without her husband, laugh again etc., but she will be different, and what is normal for her will be different. Her life in this world is forever altered.

So too, a child who has experienced a significant loss is also changed. His world is different, his security is shaken, his thoughts are deeper, his relationship with God is altered, and his innocence is shaken. Now is the time for you to be his security, his sounding board, his consolation and his companion through his journey of grief. Your presence is paramount. With the Holy Spirit, your presence is also transcendent!

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