

Children experience loss and grieve in their own way (Maria Dimitriadou, Pedagogue)

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Managing grief

Through their experiences, children gradually learn to deal with death in a more normal and healthy manner. But when children find themselves faced with the death of a loved one, whether they've been prepared for such an event or not, they experience one of the most stressful states in their lives. The loss of a person who's important to and loved by them, to whom they're attached (parent, sibling, grandparent, teacher or friend) is an occasion for children to grieve. This mourning has just as many problems and needs as adult grief does.



But children's grief is often not recognized. On the one hand, parents and grown-ups often try to protect children from the harsh reality of death and loss by obscuring the fact, limiting discussions of the subject and ignoring children's need to speak about loss, to ask about and understand it. On the other hand, as we've said before, children are very sensitive to emotional changes in their environment and try to suppress their feelings in an attempt to 'protect' their parents or favourite grown-ups. So a false picture is painted, one in which children don't experience loss and don't grieve. Nevertheless, children do experience grief in their own distinct way and this requires delicate handling on the part of grown-ups, given that childhood is a special age and is distinguished by its sensitivity.

The first opportunity to get to grips with death in childhood is usually the death of a grandparent or similar persons (an aunt or uncle). According to Father Filotheos Faros, it's a tragic mistake for grown-ups to keep children away from the process and reality of the death of people they love. Otherwise, there's a real danger of serious psychological trauma, if we consider the unhappiness, loneliness and depression children might feel if they don't know what's happening to the person they loved and who has disappeared.

If death occurs through mortal illness and isn't the result of sudden violence, there's an opportunity for more normal preparation. In such instances, it's important that children be told about the illness and they should be prepared for

the imminent death through explanations appropriate to their age. Information about an imminent or recent death should be provided by someone really close to them, not by third persons. Otherwise their confidence and trust is shaken as regards their most important relationships, such as those with their parents. And this at a particularly critical time for them, emotionally.

In the case of sickness, in particular, the best thing is for them to be told by the person dying, provided the latter are in a position to do so. They should explain to the child and convince them that everything possible is being done to keep them alive and that they'll live as long as is possible.

Explanations should be simple, brief and coherent. The younger the child, the simpler the explanation and the more frequent as the hour of death approaches. If, through this process, children are able to express themselves and talk about the imminent separation, then they're better able to deal with the event when it finally occurs. In cases of violent death, where there's been no time for preparation, the children's reactions may well be much more intense.

(to be continued)