

Grief and loss through the eyes of a young child

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

Should young children visit a loved one who is terminally ill, attend a funeral or be present in a house of mourning?

There's no one right answer. Among other things, it depends on the child, his age and level of maturity, his relationship with the person, his interest in being present and the nature of the illness or death.

Perhaps you remember how poorly your parents handled a situation with you when they were trying to protect you from the reality of loss. While today there's more openness toward death, helping to demystify it somewhat, there's still superstition, general discomfort and great ambivalence. That said, we know that how we engage our children in these topics will have an impact on how they'll cope with future loss.

Death and loss are an inevitable part of life. As much as you'd like, you cannot protect your children. They confront death daily when they step on dead insects or hear of the loss of a friend's pet, not to mention in books, on TV and in the movies.

While dealing with death may be difficult, it doesn't have to be scary and uncomfortable. I hope that you can tuck this column away and never have to use it. In being there for your child or grandchild, here are a few thoughts to help you better understand their world as seen through their small eyes.

1. Preparation is critical in helping your child understand what has just changed in his life. Whether going to visit an ill family member in the hospital or going to the cemetery or a house of mourning, the more you can describe for the child what he is likely to see and experience, the easier it will be.

Visits should be brief and include your child only if he wants to be there.

2. Involve children as much as possible in making a card or a picture for someone unwell. If you're fortunate enough to have advance warning that someone very sick may die, involve your child if possible in some way that enables him to say his good-byes.

Taking a photo of your child with his loved one, or receiving a letter for your child to read at a later time or a special keepsake from your loved one, all meaningfully connect your child to his loved one both now and in the future.

Children may have lots of questions and it is important to provide simple, honest answers

At some point you may want to ask your child for his suggestions for memorializing the loved one: making a book, planting a tree or something else that holds special meaning for him.

3. Young children experience a full range of emotions and confusion as they deal with serious illness and death of a loved one – whether a parent, grandparent, sibling, special pet or friend. If you feel that you're not the right person to talk with your children about loss, or that it may be difficult to deal with your children when you, too, may have been impacted by the same loss, help them find someone with whom they can feel safe and openly talk to about their feelings. Children need to have an outlet to express their sadness and explore their fears and to know that



CHILDREN GRIEVE sporadically in between play and other activities. They won't continuously be sad. (TNS)

their pain will lessen. When children feel that they don't have a safe outlet for talking about their feelings, their sadness may be experienced in many other ways.

4. Children do best when they know that their world remains much the same. They need to feel loved and cared for and know that someone they trust is consistently there for them. They may feel very much alone and worry that if something happened to one loved one, it could happen to another or, even worse, to themselves.

5. Young children will show signs of regression after a loss. They may act out, feel angry, show changes in their behavior and mood and even believe that their actions or misbehavior caused the illness or death. They may have difficulty sleeping and may grieve not just in their head but all over. They may have headaches and tummy aches and more. They need to know that while this may feel bad, it is normal and will get better.

6. Children may have lots of questions and it is important to provide simple, honest answers, while letting them know that each of their questions is important to you. They may feel very confused. As they try to make sense of everything, they'll come back for more information and revisit the situation. This can be encouraged by frequently asking them how they're doing and what they're thinking about. Children may have fears, worries and concerns that adults may not even think about.

If adults don't provide honest answers, children will fantasize and come up with their own answers.

Your level of explanation will depend on your child's age and stage of development. Young children may not have the concept of finality or permanence in death, and may

ask the same question repeatedly.

It's important to hear their thoughts, and it's okay to acknowledge that you don't have all the answers.

7. Be careful of the language that you use when talking with your child. The wording used to describe illness and death must be explicit. Children need to know that someone was very, very ill, and using phrases such as "gone to sleep" and "have gone away," in an attempt to lessen the loss, may lead to other problems around separation and increase their fear that something could happen to them or another loved one.

8. Children grieve sporadically in between play and other activities. They won't continuously be sad. A child who looks okay may still need to talk. If you bring things up and he doesn't want to talk with you, he'll let you know.

9. Children breathe life into a house of mourning and generally do belong there for at least short periods of time, even if they are not old enough to understand what's going on. Removing a child from loved ones may increase their anxiety at a time when things already seem so uncertain. Children can get support from being included and have a chance to say their good-byes.

While dealing with illness and loss is not easy, your open and warm approach will make things much easier both now and in the future. ■

*The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Ra'anana, and author of the book *Life's Journey: Exploring Relationships – Resolving Conflicts*. She has written about psychology in *The Jerusalem Post* since 2000. ludman@netvision.net.il; www.drbatyaludman.com*