

Tips to Help Grieving Children Navigate through the Holidays

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Adults play an instrumental role in helping children grieve, especially over the holidays, when new emotions and memories can knock with full force. Children often have trouble expressing their emotions, and when they see their parents hurting, they naturally want to protect them, so they have trouble displaying their own grief. Close friends and relatives can assist parents in helping their children grieve and find new ways to honour and remember their loved one. Consider the following **C's** as suggestions that a parent or another adult can use to help grieving children navigate through the holidays.

Conversations and connections ... Talk with them about their loved one and recount good memories in detail. They love to hear these stories over and over again. Let children share their feelings and tell their own stories. Keep the communication lines open by spending one-on-one time with them and encouraging them to participate in their favourite holiday activities.

Concise language... Until children are about 5 or 6 years old, their view of the world is very literal, so explain the death in basic and concrete terms. If the loved one was ill or elderly, for example, you might explain that the person's body wasn't working anymore and the doctors couldn't fix it. If someone dies suddenly, like in an accident, you might explain what happened — that because of this very sad event, the person's body stopped working. Explain that "dying" or "dead" means that the body stopped working. Avoid using euphemisms, such as telling them that the loved one "went away" or "went to sleep" or even that your family "lost" the person. Children think literally so such phrases might inadvertently make them afraid to go to sleep or fearful whenever someone goes away. Using phrases such as "gone away" or "passed away" may be confusing for children, especially younger ones who may think that the deceased is only gone for a while and will be returning.

Communication... Only 7% of our communication is verbal. What is the language of their grief? Words? Tears? Anger? Acting out? Distraction? Attention seeking? Regression? Physical symptoms? Music? Art? Writing? Each child's grief is unique and doesn't follow a set pattern or time-line. Use a "teach-me" approach so that they can communicate their grief style to you. Do not presume to know how they are feeling but watch their behaviour and understand their play.

Comfort... What can you do to comfort a grieving child? Make up a "comfort bag" filled with all sorts of items that bring comfort to them. Be creative, as the contents should be tailored to each child. Here are some ideas: a teddy bear or cuddly stuffed animal; a pillow made from an article of clothing from their loved one and sprayed with their favourite perfume or after-shave; a small



BEREAVED FAMILIES OF ONTARIO
HALTON/PEEL

package of Kleenex to wipe away their tears; a journal to record their thoughts and to draw pictures of their loved one; blank paper, markers, scissors, glue and holiday stickers; a bottle of bubbles; balloons; a CD of their loved one's favourite holiday music; or a picture featuring their loved one at a holiday event. They can add their own comfort objects to this bag as well. Create a list with them of people they could talk to and things they could do when they feel sad, then include it in their bag. They can add other items to it as the year goes on. Make sure that the bag itself is colourful and festive. You get the idea.

Consult... Consult with your children to determine their wishes, as Christmas can still be a special time for them. It is important to realize that children grieve in small doses and should be given the opportunity to enjoy anticipated festivities, family and friends. You can maintain their feelings of safety and security by continuing as many of their familiar traditions as possible. Encourage them to talk about special memories of their loved one, especially those related to past holidays.

Continuing Bonds... Help children maintain a connection with their deceased loved one. Continuing bonds can be maintained by talking about their loved one and sharing memories; by symbolic communication such as attaching a message to a balloon and releasing the balloon or writing a letter to the deceased; and by memorial activities, such as visiting the grave, attending memorial services, and taking part in creative ceremonies and rituals.

Contact ... Appropriate hugs, kisses, and cuddles are an ideal way to stay connected. Kids need close physical contact from their family members now more than ever. If you are a family friend, ask them how they would like to be greeted (e.g. by hugs, shaking hands, or giving a high five). Respect their right not to be touched, also.

Clown around ... Children need to take breaks in their grieving. They tend to grieve in doses and cannot be sad continuously. Encourage them to laugh and give them permission to have some fun: blow bubbles, go tobogganing, make a snowman, stage a play, or visit a toy store.

Create ... Let them draw, color, paint or construct their stories and express their feelings through their artwork. They might wish to create a Christmas ornament or a collage in memory of their loved one. Playing music, singing or writing poetry, or journaling can be encouraged.

Carry ... During the holidays, allow them to carry pictures of their loved one from past holidays. Talk about how the holidays will be different but also how some traditions will be the same. Allow the children to have a loved one's shirt or other article of clothing to sleep in. You can even spray the item with perfume or aftershave that smells like their loved one. One mom made Teddy Bears out of grandpa's old flannel shirts for her children to cuddle with.

Change ... Allow the children to help make decisions about day-to-day living and holiday plans. The children may feel they have more control of the situation when they are involved in decision-making. Change is okay.



Commemorate... Activities to commemorate their memories can be as simple as burning a holiday candle; hanging a Christmas stocking for their loved one where people can place notes describing their thoughts and feelings; or visiting the gravesite and leaving a holiday wreath, Christmas ornaments, or personal cards and letters.

Candles... For centuries people around the world have burned candles in remembrance of loved ones who have died. Lighting a candle is viewed as a sacred ritual in many different traditions and religions. To light a virtual candle, go to the following website:

www.gratefulness.org/candles/enter.cfm?l=eng

Centre ... Remember the family is the centre of your children's world. They need stability, and it is your responsibility to maintain it. If your situation seems overwhelming then allow caring friends to help you out. Seek out support from your community as well.

Culture... The grieving child's responses are influenced by her cultural and ethnic backgrounds, so plan activities that celebrate the family's traditions and beliefs.

Computers... can supply a wealth of information about how to help grieving children and teens. Myspace, Facebook and other computer programs provide unique ways to mourn and commemorate. Here are some helpful links to check out on your computer:

A website for grieving teens by BFO Toronto www.soul2soul.ca

Online Grief Counselling www.sharegrief.com

Compassionate Support www.kara-grief.org

Create a Memorial Website www.memory-of.com/Public/

Linda Goldman: www.childrengrief.net

Liana Lowenstein: Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children and Adolescents

www.lianalowenstein.com

ADEC www.adec.org

Bereaved Families of Ont www.bereavedfamilies.net

Bereavement Ontario Network www.bereavementontarionetwork.ca

Bill Webster www.GriefJourney.com

Dougy Centre www.dougy.org

Sibling Grief www.siblingconnection.net

Virtual Hospice www.virtualhospice.ca

Grief Works B.C. www.griefworksbc.com

Winstons Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk

Control ... Remember your children's worlds may be in chaos. You can control their sense of safety, security and structure by setting specific times for wake-up, bed, meal, school, homework and television watching. Christmas can be especially hard, as schedules tend to be interrupted over the holidays.

Composure ... Don't feel like you always have to be composed, as it is okay for your children to see your tears and pain. Model how it's possible to blend mourning and celebration. You can remember the person who died and mourn his absence while still finding joy in the holiday season.

Care ... Grief affects the total person and requires care for the body, mind, and soul. It is especially important to focus on healthy eating, exercise, and sleeping patterns.

Closeness... Stay close to your children through daily talks or activities. One of the best places to get a child to talk is in the car. During the holidays, play your loved one's favorite Christmas music while in the car and encourage the children to sing along. This could lead to a healthy discussion about the things their loved one liked about the holidays.

Cook ... Let them bake a special holiday meal or dessert in memory of their loved one. Invite family and friends to join in. If the loved one had a favorite Christmas candy or a favourite dessert, encourage the child to make those items and talk about how much the loved one enjoyed these foods.

Celebrate ... Let them go to holiday parties and family get-togethers. Make new memories and new traditions. Attend a candlelight memorial service and let them honour the memory of their loved one.

Compassion ... Let them help those who are less fortunate. Purchase a gift for a needy child, deliver meals to a less fortunate family, or assist at a shelter feeding the homeless.

Church... Attend religious services with them at this special time of year if this is part of your tradition. It is important to pay attention to their spiritual beliefs.

Closure ... There really is no such thing as "closure." Their loved one will continue to be a part of their lives through their continued bonds of love and memory, especially during the holiday season. They will never get over their loss and forget their loved one, but they will develop a "new normal" as their grief progresses and their pain subsides.

Capacity ... It is helpful to know that children are amazingly resilient and have the capacity to heal. There are some reliable signs of recovery: holiday memories cause smiles not tears; regular sleeping and eating patterns resume; tears and anger are less frequent; and the child is doing things he used to do in an age appropriate manner. Even though grieving children are hurting, it is reassuring to know that they can still experience some of the "magic" this holiday season.





"The greatest gift you can give your children is not protection from change, loss, pain or stress, but the confidence and tools to cope and grow with all that life has to offer them."

- Dr. Wendy Harpham

C.H.I.L.D

C - "**consider**" the needs of the child

H - "**honesty**" in dealing with the child

I - "**involve**" the child

L - "**listen**" to the child

D - "**do**" it again and again



See This Child

See this child before you
wounded
vulnerable
changed
...the child of yesterday gone forever.

Who will really look at this child!
Is it easier to assume
he will emerge unscathed
than to face the turmoil with him?

Who will step into the road
before this child...
laden with mountains and valleys,
potholes and detours?

Who will walk a bit of his journey with him?

Who will offer temporary shelter
from the storms that rage around
and within this child?

Who will open doors that this child
cannot see through his pain?

Who will listen to what this child
is really saying
when he is belligerent
when he is too shy to speak
when his laughter masks his fears?

Who will help this child to recognize
his successes,
and give him courage to step
beyond his failures with dignity?

Who will be with this child
on the other side of healing
as he recognizes his growth
and acceptance?

Death and the Classroom: A Teacher's Guide to Assist Grieving Students,
Kathleen Cassini and Jacqueline Rogers

