

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Helping Children with Grief

By Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

Few of us like to think or talk about death. This topic usually brings about extreme anxiety and depression in many of us. Maybe this is why we try to protect and cushion on children from death. Often we try to keep children away from major life events: births, severe illness, life stressors, and death. When we keep children out of the family circle, they may feel left out. When we don't take time to explain the death of a loved one to our children, withdrawal and acting out behaviors may occur. One of the best ways to protect our children is to provide them with simple and straightforward answers to their questions.

Children are curious by nature, and usually have many questions. Kids usually become curious about death between the ages of five and seven. Prior to this, children cannot understand the finality of death. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible, a belief reinforced by cartoon characters who die and come to life again. This is also the time that children are leaving for kindergarten and school, and are experiencing more of the world. When someone in the child's life has died, it may be helpful for us to explain the life/death cycle. We could relate this to plants, animals, and people. If we had a family pet die, we can make a comparison to this. We could point out that we will always love and remember the deceased family pet, and we will always love and remember the deceased friend or relative.

It may be beneficial to explain that people die at all ages. If we say that only older people die, children may not trust us when one of their young friends dies. Saying that the deceased person has "gone to heaven" may be helpful, depending on the families spiritual perspectives. Remember that young children have literal minds, and they may want to go to heaven to visit the deceased person. Explaining the immediate cause of death; whether accident, illness, or old age may be more understandable to a child than giving a philosophical interpretation.

It is probably not helpful to say the deceased person has "gone to sleep." Children may develop sleep related problems, nightmares, and feel that monsters are in their bedrooms. Likewise, to say the deceased person has "gone on a long trip" may make the child afraid of travel and vacations.

We do need to encourage our children to talk about death. Children frequently think scary thoughts about death. Their thoughts and fantasies are probably much worse than reality. Guilt is frequently a big issue for children when a loved one dies, especially a parent. During a frustrating moment, a parent may have said "you're killing me with your behavior." If this parent dies unexpectedly, the child may feel overwhelmed with guilt. This is also seen with siblings. Sibling rivalry is common in families. If a girl says about her younger brother "I don't like him. I wish it was dead" - and her brother does die; then she may feel that her thoughts caused his death.

I feel it is important to let children participate in activities surrounding death. This helps them to feel a part of the household, and that they are an important member in the family. They may help put coats

away when condolence callers arrive, or they may assist by serving food and drinks when the family is together.

Explaining funerals to children can be beneficial to them. Children age five or six may benefit from attending funerals. This does several things. It allows children to start to bring closure to the death. It helps them to say goodbye to the deceased member. Additionally, it allows the child to see that others feel the same way as they do. However, if a child is frightened about attending a funeral, then they should not be forced to go. They could honor or remember the person in other ways; such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer, making a scrapbook, reviewing photographs, or telling a story about the deceased individual.

It can be helpful to bring out pictures of the deceased individual. This allows the child, as well as us, to talk about the deceased person. We could help the child, and ourselves, to focus on memories of the loved one. This is part of the grieving, and healing process. I feel it is important to be aware of our own feelings of grief towards the deceased person. We may be grieving ourselves. Many adults are reluctant to cry in front of their children. When we try to hide our sadness, children may wonder if we are really sad or not; and whether it's all right for them to feel sadness. In explaining the grieving process, point out very natural feelings of confusion, sadness, and anger. Frequently young children respond the same way adults too. Our showing and expressing grief lets children see that adults have strong feelings too. This also gives them permission to grieve and express feelings. Surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly and freely.

Children who are having serious problems with grief and loss may show one and more of these signs:

- an extended period of depression
- inability to sleep
- prolonged fear of being alone.
- excessively imitating the deceased person
- repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person
- withdrawal from friends
- sharp drop in school performance

If these signs persist, professional help may be needed. A child or adolescent psychiatrist, or other qualified mental health professional, can help the child accept the death; and assist others in helping the child through the mourning process. We all need to remember that grieving the loss of a loved one is a very natural and healthy human response.