

Helping Heal the Heartache of Children's Grief

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Although change is part of life, sometimes change happens too quickly, as in floods or fires. Then children are left at the mercy of strong feelings without knowing how to name them or what to do with them. Often parents or other adults are experiencing the changes as well, and the loss that goes with that, and have very little time or energy to devote to the grief of their children.

Paradise Kids has had over 13 years experience in helping children to heal the heartache of grief and here are some of the things you can do, over a week, that we know helps. If you help your child do this, then you will be helped as well.

1. Change. Help the child to know that change is part of life, that some changes bring big losses and that grief is a normal response to a loss of any kind. Talk about the fact that change and loss can bring strong feelings in the body, and maybe nightmares. Help the child to externalise loss by drawing what has been lost or drawing their nightmare. Teach them to do deep breathing which helps with strong feelings.

2. The Story. Help the child talk about the changes that have happened in the family, in the home, in the street, in the school or in the neighbourhood. Telling your own story helps. Scientific evidence shows that your immune system is boosted when you tell a story.

Children can draw a time-line about where they used to live, when the floods came, what they lost, where they are now. Buy them a journal to use for feelings, drawings, dreams or poems. If the child has lost all their photos, get them to draw their favourite time and place and memory of before the loss. Make a list of all that was lost. Add as many things as you can to the list, e.g. a favourite toy, birthday candles, books, a bed or pillow.

3. Feelings. Help the child feel the feelings, and normalise them, especially after their lists of losses. Don't try to protect them from the feelings of distress or sadness, shock or fear. Get them to draw a picture of their body and put their feelings in it, with colours where strong feelings are, or symbols like butterflies in the tummy or sore throats or headaches.

Relate this to stress in the body when feelings happen, like a dream in which the child thinks the dreams are pictures in their heads, but they have body responses like racing hearts or pulses. Let the child draw or paint to music. Teach the child to breathe into parts of the body that are hurting. There are a lot of good meditation tapes around, so put on a meditation tape while the child paints.

4. Anger and Strong Feelings. Remind your child that anger is part of the grief process and is normal. It is how the anger is handled that mat-

ters. Get the child to scribble anger onto a phone book, or newspaper and rip it up. Get them some plasticine or clay and let them externalise their anger to strong loud music. Give them a pillow to shout into or to hit with their hands. Remember to tell them to keep themselves, others and the furniture safe.

5. Saying Goodbye. If you have any photos or videos of what used to be, let the child talk about them. In order to let go of the past, it is important to remember it. Say goodbye to the house/ trees/ schools/ pets by writing a letter saying what was good about the thing that used to be. What the child would say if they could say anything to the person or thing or pet that was lost – especially if a pet or family member died. What does the child have to look forward to in this new life?

6. Commemorating. Help the child value what has been, and also look forward to the future. Get them a memory box to put things in. If all has been lost, they can put their memories in the form of letters or cards or drawings. Remind them that at times like birthdays or Christmas, things will be different now. Do a guided meditation of a safe place a child can go to. Get the family to have a ceremony of saying goodbye. Light a candle for all that has been and a candle for hope. Afterwards, they can put these in their memory boxes.

7. Receive permission to move on in life. Remind children that they have inner resources even if outer things have gone. Share the knowledge that it is OK to laugh and to play, as well as to cry. Tell them life is like a series of waves, you go up and down. Let the child know that you are grieving too and let them see you cry. Tell them they don't have to fix you, you are just having feelings that you all share as human beings. Ask them what qualities they like about themselves. Get them to draw a circle with them in the middle, the people who care about them in an outer circle, then a bigger circle for friends, then a bigger circle with other resources, school counsellors, etc.

Nurture your child in body, mind and spirit with healthy food, (maybe volunteers can help cook) explanations about the normality of strong feelings and ways to deal with them, and walking in nature, listening to music or watching a sunset that heralds letting go and looking forward to a new day.

Paradise Kids also uses Art, Meditation for stress reduction, Guided Visualisations, Movement, Music, Sand Play Therapy and Sculpting to help Heal the Heartache.

For information, visit www.paradisekids.org.au and www.paradisekidsbrisbane.org.au