

Conley Outreach Community Services



Caring for the Heart of Community

Dear Parent,

We know that watching your child grieve is hard. When YOU are grieving too; when you are overwhelmed thinking, “it could have been my son or my daughter; it could have been our family,” those thoughts and feelings make this moment even more painful and complicated. As you may have suspected, there are no easy answers and no quick short-cuts through grief, but there are some little things that may help a lot. Please take a few minutes to read through this “pamphlet”. At the end, you will find links and phone numbers to more help.

KEY PRINCIPLES: REMEMBER that any child who is old enough to love, is old enough to grieve. Our challenge as adults is to set aside our assumptions enough to see and hear the grief in our children and connect with it.

What to Watch For:

Think of grief as energy looking for a way out. You will often find that “grief energy” expresses itself as hyper-activity or angry outbursts. Sometimes it hides in a sad corner of your child and causes them to be more quiet, sullen or depressed than normal. Still other times children express their grief by trying very hard to be soooo good that they will win praise, the people around them will act happy and normal again and most of all, nothing else bad will happen in their lives. These are all normal reactions. When it comes to grief, “Normal” encompasses a huge range of behavior and a much longer time-line than we think. Be patient.

What to Do

When you see “sad, mad, glad” behavior think of ways you can be creative with it. You know your child better than any one so don’t be afraid to follow your instincts. For instance, do something meaningful in memory of a loved one; do something comforting that calms anxious feelings or do something interesting that helps them explore the questions they may have about life and death, sorrow and joy. Learning about grief is an important part of *healing* grief. Exploring grief with a grown up (at the library, church or other resource center) can be an empowering experience that helps validate children’s thoughts and feelings and teaches them how to help themselves as well as others. Play is a natural way for children to work through their thoughts and feelings. Don’t be surprised if they decide to play “funeral” or “accident” or “doctor”. Let their play be your way to listen.

Limits:

Every child is different but every child has a limit to how much “grief” he or she can manage at any given time. Notwithstanding that sometimes we do need to sit our children down and help them focus while we talk about important things, try to avoid “dump trucking” or burying your child in a pile of information and feelings that avalanche from your mountain of anxiety about them.

Talking

Getting kids to talk to you about their grief is sometimes like getting them to eat. You would like them to sit at the table and eat with a fork and spoon but sometimes, you might need to settle for letting them snack on a bite here and there with a little play in between. Getting some children to talk about their feelings is like trying to get them to eat spinach. Other children (though perhaps not many!) will devour spinach like it was candy. The same is true of their approach to learning about life, death and grief. Some will have ten thousand questions while others have none. The most important thing for them to know is that it is ok to think what they think, to feel what they are feeling and to talk with you about it.

Remembering

Sometimes you can't remember someone without crying and sometimes not without laughing. Both expressions are normal and equally important. Of all the things death takes from us and all the things we cannot explain and don't know about it, MEMORIES are the things we get to keep. Helping your child remember by talking, creating scrap books or little personal memorial projects like planting a flower or bush in the yard, are great ways to focus on what you get to keep, to remember the good times you shared. Through this time, some children will tend to cling more. As days pass into weeks and months, this behavior generally becomes less frequent. It's a little like holding on to the side of the swimming pool or a grown up friend, until the water seems warm and safe to swim in. Be confident and consistent in your support, be present and be patient with your child. If your intuition tells you there is something wrong, just call us. We'll help.

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RESOURCE & REFERRAL:

To learn more about our programs and others, we invite you to call Conley Outreach at 630-365-2880 or visit us on-line at www.conleyoutreach.org. Our Conley Outreach, program coordinator or one of our volunteers, can help you determine your needs and help you connect with a variety of programs and resources. For in depth counseling, we are also affiliated with Heartland Counseling, a division of the Center for Rural Psychology, Elburn. They provide masters and doctorate level counseling and can be reached at 365-0899 or visit www.heartland.ruralpsych.org. In the Fox Valley Community at-large, there are a variety of grief support groups and programs for adults and children. In addition to those we provide, we network with other not-for-profit groups and professionals to help you find the support that best suits you and your needs.