

their own feelings of helplessness. They may do everything "right," even to the extent of parenting their parents. Some children exhibit exaggerated displays of power to counteract their fears, and this may take the form of super-hero manifestations or may look like what we would characterize as naughty behavior, acting out, anger and/or belligerence. Some children may withdraw and become very quiet, frozen in fear.

Guilt

There are many kinds of guilt about a death including guilt from intentional action that may have caused a death, regret for actions (or lack of) that might have prevented the death or an unrealistic sense of responsibility that protects us from the senselessness of the death. Sometimes unrealistic guilt can ease the fear that children may feel when someone dies. Taking unrealistic responsibility for a death gives children a false reassurance that they can prevent unwanted events if only they try harder.

Over-protectiveness of children can also produce a child's guilt. As a natural protection mechanism, parents want to protect their children from painful events. Because of this, they sometimes do not tell their children what is taking place. Children perceive the tension, sadness and anger and become frightened upon feeling something horrible is taking place but no one is talking to them about it.

All children attempt to make sense out of what is happening in their surroundings and do so by filling in the gaps with their own imagined explanations, often with a sense of personal responsibility for what has taken place. As they develop, they begin to comprehend that life's events happen and that they are not solely responsible.

When a child feels unrealistic guilt for a death, remind him or her of the facts of the situation. "It's not your fault. You are a child and could not have taken over the driving of the car to save Daddy. Daddy was an adult, a good driver, and he couldn't do it." "The other car was coming towards us too fast, and that is why it hit us and killed Daddy."

When a child continues to feel unrealistic guilt, acknowledge that it is a difficult feeling to have. The child may need to continue to feel the guilt until he or she is ready to feel the more difficult feelings of vulnerability that the death has brought up.

Anger

There are different kinds of anger expressed in grieving. There may be unresolved issues between a child and the person who died, which can result in anger in the child. There may be anger in a child as a protest against the fact of the death and the lack of dependability of life. Anger can also be an antidote to fear, manifesting in an outward display of personal power. A child may communicate through anger: "I am strong enough to control life with my force." A child may become rebellious or resistant to counteract the vulnerability of feeling fear and sorrow.

Sorrow

When a child feels sorrow, he or she may be ready to accept the truth of the loss without protest. Sorrow can be an expression of a child's feelings of vulnerability as he or she continues to live without the person who died. The child may grieve a loss of security. Loving arms around a child who cries with sorrow can offer safety and acceptance in a world that includes the dying of those we love.

Acceptance

It is our experience that we do not "get over" an important death in our lives. We learn to live with it, accept it and go on with our lives to create joy in living. Gentle acknowledgment of the ones who have died gives depth throughout our lives to the picture of our experience of life and death.

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