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Helping Young Children Cope with Trauma and Loss

1. It is important to tell the child about what has happened. Talk with the child about what he/she knows already (children often have uncanny abilities to pick up on traumatic events). Offer basic information that is appropriate for the child in language and images that child can understand. Try not to give information that would be too frightening/distressing. Be honest and keep it simple. Offer love and support. By opening up a conversation with the child, you are offering tremendous support. Research has shown that the most important factor assisting children in coping with traumatic events is having a relationship with a caring adult with whom to talk or just be.
2. Answer any questions the child may have and stress your willingness to talk again if more questions come up. Follow up on this with the child from time to time.
3. You might want to encourage an expression of feelings, for example by a drawing. However, it is not unusual for children to appear to be without particular emotions or concerns when told. You can observe free play or spontaneous artwork for clues to how the child is processing the information. Many children express their feelings through play, not verbally.
4. When talking with the child, you may learn much about what beliefs/knowledge the child has about death, the meaning of death, the afterlife, why bad things happen. You may want to offer your thoughts on these topics, without challenging the child's.
5. Children grieve differently than adults. Their expression of grief is sporadic; they are often more capable than adults of putting grief aside by focusing on something pleasant. This is called denial. Other expressions you may see in children after learning of a sudden death are giggles or laughter (the child needs to be reassured that this is sometimes a way that people deal with big, overwhelming feelings). Children may show anger and disruptive behavior; they may have fears (sometimes expressed through clinging, whining); behaviors appropriate to a younger age may appear; and often feelings are expressed through physical symptoms, such as tummy aches or just a general "I don't feel good". It is most helpful, when you hear expressions of feelings by the child to simply acknowledge and accept these feelings.
6. Children may be fearful that the traumatic event could occur to them. These fears may be expressed directly or through dreams and nightmares. Things are happening that they have not been prepared for and cannot understand. Their world no longer feels as safe. Talk with them about events – what has happened and what to expect. Identify specific fears and offer reassurance. Keep as many daily routines going as possible.
7. Give the child an opportunity to say good bye in his/her own way to the person who has died. If the child will attend memorial services, he/she should be prepared beforehand on



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what to expect. Funerals can be described as a time to say a final goodbye, a way to express our love, a memorial and celebration of the dead one's life, an opportunity to be with others for bonding and support. Review rituals that will occur. Describe what will be expected of the child. Prepare the child for emotions that may come up in the child and in the adults with the child – for example, that many people cry at funerals to express their sadness at the loss of someone close to them, and there are other strong feelings that may be expressed. Reassure the child that although adults close to him/her may be quite emotional during the service (and during the grieving process), the adults are still able to take care of them.

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