

# ***HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAUMATIC LOSS***

*Bereavement Magazine January/February 1997*

*By Linda Goldman*

*Chevy Chase, MD*

So often I have found that the children are forgotten during traumatic events. Caregivers, parents, and guardians can be temporarily absent for kids because they are consumed with their own grief or unable to express their grief openly. Lacking role models and assurances for a safe journey, boys and girls can become “emotionally stuck” and unable to express themselves until their overwhelming feelings can be released. It is as though they become frozen in time. They must be given a safe environment to work through their grief.

A helpful environment for grief work can be threefold. First, parents, educators, therapists, and caring adults need to create an atmosphere where children can feel safe enough to express all of their overwhelming feelings.

Second, children need an adult advocate as a role model, whether it is a parent, teacher, coach, or even the President of the United States.

Third, the adults involved need to restore confidence and trust during this very vulnerable time.

For children, feared loss of the protection of the adult world can be transformed through reassurances, through providing facts about actions taken, and through procedures for including children in memorializing. Child-oriented conversations and commemorations about tragic occurrences can teach kids by modeling how to process and deal with such difficult events.

The caretaker’s first job with children is to become familiar with the normal reactions of kids to traumatic loss so that they will be better able to normalize these feelings and thoughts for the children. Understanding what children naturally do during trauma can reduce the fear that they are acting out in a bad, wrong, or “different” way.

Prime examples are children’s preoccupation with death and fear for the health and safety of themselves and those they love. Boys and girls often want and need to tell and retell their stories, and they need a safe environment to do so. Kids, especially young kids, work through much of their grief through play (drawings, writing, puppets, etc). An active, playing child can still be a grieving child.

Children tend to talk about their loved ones in the present, imitating them, yearning to be with them, or trying to replace them in the family system. Rage, terror, revenge, and shame are four of the powerful feelings that accompany traumatic loss, and the intensity and enormity of these feelings are often very scary to the young child. Kids may withdraw, act out in school, bedwet, have nightmares, or appear not to be bothered. Every child is unique, and so is his/her grief.

When tragedy occurs, often multiple losses follow. Sometimes the primary caretakers for the child are also temporarily absent because they are engulfed in their own grief, causing losses ranging from diminished care and attention to the loss of the day-to-day routine. This is why it is essential to provide an advocate and a role model for children at such times. Kids need a safe place where they know they can just be, without pressure to talk, but with the support that if they want, they can talk about what they have experienced.

Kids also need adults that can model their own adult feelings. “I’m so sad and angry about the plane crash. I wish there was something I could do.” The viewing children of America who experience tragedies through the media such as TWA Flight 800 also experience seeing the President of the United States put other issues aside to be with the families of the victims, and they witness the First Lady’s sadness as she speaks to the survivors. They can see that human kindness, caring, and reaching out are some of the many ways we can help others and also help ourselves to heal.

Many times adults are uncomfortable when children express deep feelings, attempting to “protect” them so they won’t feel bad. Instead of allowing normal feelings to flow, kids can become disconnected from their feelings, creating a generation of young people who can commit or witness horrible acts with no sign of compassion or emotion. How the adult world views and reacts to the grief process can dramatically effect a child’s experience of trauma.

As caring adults, we can use the President’s compassion as a “teachable moment” for our children to see how we can help one another during a crisis. Trust and confidence begins to be restored for the children by emphasizing that this would be done for them, too, because this is what human beings do for each other.

Kids can be included in conversations and actions by presenting the ways experts are working to find the cause of tragedies (such as the crash) to help prevent it from happening again. Parents and professionals can explain facts that reinforce the safety record of travel for airlines, trains, and cars. Emphasis can be placed on the ways adults are taking action, such as the President’s promotion of stronger procedures and better equipment in airports.

Finally, let’s provide opportunities for the children to actively participate in commemorating personal loss as well as loss occurring in their community, their nation, and their world. Encourage kids to draw a picture, write a story, send a personal article to the bereaved family. Light a candle, say a prayer, plant a flower with your child to remember a loved one or even a stranger who died in a plane crash they saw on TV.

Not only does this empower the children by allowing them to take action, but it reminds us all that we are part of a large world that can be very caring for others and that this is what we as human beings can do for each other during times of crisis. Life and

death are universal, ongoing, and timeless. How we participate, act, and react in the process is an ever-expanding learning opportunity for both adults and children.

**Children's Normal Grief Symptoms:**

- Continually retells events about loved one and the death.
- Feels loved one is present in some way and speaks of them in the present tense.
- Experiences nightmares and sleeplessness.
- Cannot concentrate on schoolwork.
- Appears at times to not feel anything.
- Is pre-occupied with death and worries excessively about health issues.
- Is afraid to be left alone.
- Cries often at unexpected time.
- Bedwets or loses appetite.
- Idealizes loved one who died and assumes mannerisms.
- Becomes "class bully" or "class clown."
- Feels headaches and stomach aches.
- Rejects old friends, withdraws, or acts out.

**Ways Children Can Commemorate:**

- Plant a flower or a tree.
- Blow bubbles.
- Send a balloon.
- Light a candle.
- Say a prayer.
- Write a poem, story, or song about the loved one who died. Send it to their family.
- Talk into a tape recorder or make a video of memories.
- Make cookies or cake and bring to the family of the person who died.
- Create a mural or collage about the life of the person who died.