

HELPING CHILDREN WITH DEATH OR TRAGEDY

By Dr. Robin F. Goodman

When children experience the death of someone special or deal with tragic events, it can be difficult to know what to say and how to help children. We offer the following suggestions to guide adults.

Talk to your children: Start with a general statement or question then listen to what they say or ask. Look for opportunities to check in more than once.

Be honest: Use age appropriate language, share basic information, and correct misinformation. It's OK to say "I don't know" and focus on what you do know.

Reassure: Using routine and structure to reassure children they will be all right, you are all right, and things in their world will continue. Remind them of the people that take care of them and how to get help.

Return to the familiar: Getting back to familiar tasks and distracting or even fun activities provides balance and perspective.

Use media sense: Turn off or limit TV viewing especially for little ones. Monitor what news and social media children and teens are watching or using.

Model coping: Adults have feelings and can help children by modeling appropriate ones and especially how to cope with upset or sadness in healthy ways.

Encourage expression: Children may more easily express their thoughts and feelings in pictures, music, play and poems. Be careful not to press for details but rather validate how they feel and problem solve ways to feel better.

Stay connected: Being connected to others – friends, family, a faith community – can be especially healing and powerful when feeling upset, overwhelmed and alone.

Provide comfort: Hugs – given and received - help everyone, young and old.

Find the good: Look for stories of hope. Cope with kindness. When able, be the hope – reach out a hand, offer help, care for others day to day.

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