

Miss Katie's Kids Korner

Thanatology*

by Katie Taylor

(*noun. the study of death, esp. of the medical, psychological, and social problems associated with death.)

A few weeks ago, I read a prepared statement to the class that one of their fellow students had died. As I read, I put the name to the face and felt something sharp stab at my stomach.

Upon hearing the news that my father had died, a bomb exploded in my heart: and the day my grandmother moved to an assisted living facility, I forgot how to read for a couple of hours. It's odd, but my body seems to respond to "death" before my brain can grasp the true meaning of it all.

We all react to the news of a death differently. For many children, their response will reflect what their teachers and counselors show them. That day, after the announcement was made, the library was closed so that grieving students could come in for counseling. It was a sad day for all of us, and the teachers and counselors of the *Ellenville High School* should be commended for providing such an excellent example of how to respond to the death of a student.

Many parents complain about the increase in violence shown on TV and in video games, but have you watched the news lately? With graphic pictures of the devastating tsunami, the daily body count from the war in Iraq, the gruesome details of homicides screaming out of our screens during the dinner hour, our children are bombarded with death. We as parents and teachers cannot shield our children from the existence of death, nor should we. However, there are ways to help your child through the grieving process.

Children should be told the truth. Grandma is not "sleeping" or "gone away"; she is dead. When talking to your child about death, use words that he will understand, and be truthful and succinct. Try to avoid any unnecessary information, and don't display excessive emotion. Too much information might confuse him and seeing you upset will only distress your child more. While it is good for your child to see you express your own emotions, save the strong, dramatic feelings for private times with other adults.

Upon hearing the news of the loss of a loved one, children may not react immediately, or in a way you would expect. A 5-year-old hearing the news of the death of his beloved grandfather might simply nod and go back to whatever it is he was doing. Later, however, he might start acting out in inappropriate ways, reverting to old behavior patterns like thumb-sucking or hitting.

Grieving is a process and not something that happens in one sitting.

Encourage your child to talk and ask questions; find out what he thinks. Assure him that what he is feeling is OK and that it's OK to be mad at Grandpa for dying. Very often, a child will even feel he is to blame for the person's death. It is up to us as parents and teachers to reassure and correct any misconceptions and misinformation they might hold. Listening and comforting are very important components when consoling an older child. Being confronted with death may stimulate strong personal feelings that might not have anything to do with the person who died.

A death could bring into question a teenager's own mortality as well as insecurity about the future and drastic changes in their daily routines and even their beliefs. They might become withdrawn, angry or reckless with their own well being – daring the fates to take them, also. Keep in mind that it will probably take more than one conversation with your teenager to get to his true feelings. Be there for him and enlist the help of teachers and counselors. My research on this topic said that you should talk, but I think that talking shouldn't be forced. Sometimes just hanging out baking a batch of cookies, washing the car, walking the dog, and doing normal stuff that's not connected to grieving can be a welcome change. Yes, it's good to "let it all out," but sometimes it's easier when you're doing something totally unrelated.

In addition to normal daily activities, creative outlets such as drawing or journal writing can also be helpful in the grieving process and should be encouraged. Also in my readings, there was lots of use of the word "closure." Dr. Robin Goodman advises in her paper entitled *Children and Grief: What They Know, How They Feel, How to Help*, says: "Find ways for your child to be involved in the funeral process. This will help demystify the events and provide closure."

From personal experience, grieving is never really closed. It might be altered a bit, hurt a little less, become a bit fuzzy, but somehow that door is never shut. I like to think the reason it isn't closed is that the people who pass through our lives leave a mark that can't be erased by time. Their lives and their affect on mine are something I take with me always.

***Deep inside my heart
Exist the people, places, and things I love
Although no longer with me in body
Their spirit remains forever
Happy and alive in my soul.***

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