

HELPING GRIEVING CHILDREN HANDLE THE HOLIDAYS

The first holidays without a person are usually the hardest due to the anticipation of the unknown. What will it be like without that person?

For children, holidays without someone they love are just as painful as for adults. Maybe more so, depending on what traditions end with the death. If Mom was the one who bought all the great gifts at Christmas, her death means not only having lost Mom, but also the very practical loss of all those neat gifts. The gift certificate from Dad may not live up to all their expectations.

The magic of the holidays is usually more exciting for children than for adults. Children gain comfort from routine, so maintaining family traditions as much as possible is a good idea. A family tradition does not have to be celebrated exactly as it always was, you can modify it in some ways and it can still be meaningful.

After a death, the best way to find out what the kids would find most comforting and meaningful for each holiday is to ask them. This sounds simple, but you would be surprised at how often it is overlooked.

If you are a surviving adult, you cannot expect to help your children without first trying to help yourself. Children often take their lead from adults. How you are handling things can determine in part, how they will handle things. Discuss their needs in relationship to yours and then make some concrete decisions on what you will do.

Young children may not be able to verbalize their feelings and needs. I have found having children draw how they feel can reveal things that are hard for them to express verbally. With teenagers, all those dynamics that make it difficult for adults to communicate with them under normal circumstances are intensified while grieving. When talking doesn't work, each of you write down what you are feeling and what you need. Once everyone's anxieties, fears and needs are out in the open, you can make your plans.

Some suggestions that have proven helpful to others are: have the kids help bake cookies or cupcakes for a nursing home or a group that had meaning to the deceased. Doing something good for someone else can give the holiday special meaning.

Encouraging kids to write a note, draw or paste up a picture, or even make some small gift for the deceased can be meaningful for them. Take the letter or gift to the cemetery and dig a small hole at the grave and bury it, or let it float away in a river, lake or ocean, or have a small ceremony and burn it in the backyard or fireplace. Making a simple ceremony out of whatever you do with it, makes the gesture more meaningful.

Even though children can experience very intense grief emotions on a holiday, they can

also act at times during the day, as if nothing is wrong. They may be depressed one moment and be playing with a Christmas toy, laughing and really enjoying themselves the next. This is the normal grieving pattern for them. They may want to spend part of the day with their friends. Don't insist that you stay together for the entire day. They may need the support and security and "hanging out" with their friends provides.

However, prepare for an opposite type of reaction to friends, also. Your child may need to be comforted if kids make some comment that hurts them. One third grade girl got upset at a Christmas party when her friends said her brother was dead six months and she shouldn't still be feeling bad. Don't be afraid to talk about the person who died, share some holiday memories about them. This process can be sad and painful, but it can also lead to happy memories and even laughter. I have seen it happen a number of times, the conversation sears and everyone is crying and then someone says something such as "remember how crooked the trees were that dad used to pick out." This leads to another funny or happy memory and another. Whether it ends in tears or laughter, it can be helpful for kids and you.

I can't stress enough the importance of planning for the holidays especially the first year after the death. Let your children know you may not be in the best physical or emotional condition, that day. Explain that if you are upset, angry or sad, it is not because of anything they did. Let them know no matter how they feel it's okay because they are not expected to feel any certain way. A child may feel guilty if his mother is crying and upset the entire holiday, and he/she doesn't have the same reaction. Give them permission to feel the way they do. Do not put too many demands on them or yourself for the day, keep plans flexible.

Be prepared for any type of response especially from adolescents. Their grief reactions can often be expressed as anger. They may say things or act in ways that can be hurtful. This is extremely difficult to handle if they were directed toward you, especially when your emotions can be stretched to the limits by your own grief. Give them some latitude, they are especially vulnerable. One mother told me that on holidays when her teenager was nasty or hurtful she would keep saying to herself, "this too shall pass."

Change it for next year if it "didn't work..." Just as you plan ahead for each holiday, do a post-holiday evaluation. Discuss how things went, what worked, what didn't and what you want to do next year.

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