

# Myths of Children's Grief

## Fundamental Misunderstandings of Childhood Grief

### **Children Don't Grieve**

- Children grieve all losses in spurts, several times a day.
- They re-grieve throughout all developmental stages.
- Children don't know they're grieving or understand their feelings

### **Children Experience Few Losses**

- Children experience loss on a daily basis:
  - At School: Sports; grades; competitions; self esteem; relationships.
  - At Home: Control; understanding; dysfunctional family losses.

### **Childhood is the Happiest Time of One's Life**

- A child will go through six developmental stages between birth and age 21.
- Each stage is marked by a period of continuous change in cognition, feelings and physical development.
- Almost every area of life through each developmental stage is totally controlled by circumstances outside of the influence of the child.

*- Presented in a seminar for the Grief Resource Foundation, 1978*

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## Ten Common Myths of Childhood Grief:

### **1. Grief and mourning are the same experience.**

Grief has been described as the inward process following the death while mourning takes on characteristics of outward expressions of grief or the sharing of ones story.

### **2. Adults instantly can give explanations to children about death and spirituality.**

Adults often deny that children can experience the painful feelings of death and are also dealing with the rawness of the experience. Therefore, many adults cannot bring themselves to address the needs of children around them and often benefit from professional support at this time.

### **3. The experience of grief and mourning has orderly stages.**

Our reactions to grief are not linear in nature. We can be overwhelmed by any one or combination of grief reactions that often leave the child feeling as though they have lost control of life.

### **4. The grief of adults does not impact on the bereaved child.**

Children are keenly aware of the grieving adults around them and need accurate information about the death. Including the children in the activities and experiences following the death of a loved one diminishes anxiety and fear that otherwise may grow into negative behaviors if left unaddressed. Children care for the adults in their lives and long to soothe those around them. After the death of a loved one a child from infancy through adolescence needs reassurance that together the family will survive this difficult time.

### **5. Adults should avoid topics that cause a child to cry.**

Tears are essential to healing for all ages. While exhausting to cry it helps the healing process. Children also teach us that they are sad because their loved one died and therefore no one can say anything that will make them sadder.

**6. An active playing child is not a grieving child.**

This is one of the essential differences in how child grieve. Once told that their loved one has died a child will often protect themselves from the pain by engaging in a familiar activity, this is a healthy self-soothing process. They should not be shamed for taking care of themselves. A young child may ask to watch cartoons or a teen may go outdoors immediately and shoot hoops or ride their bikes. This behavior only indicates that they are taking a brief break and will return to their grief again, many times.

**7. Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.**

It has been stated "if you are old enough to love you are old enough to mourn." Anyone bonded to another will recognize that that person is no longer with them and feel the pain of the loved ones absence.

**8. Parents, educators, and clergy always are prepared and qualified to give explanations and clarifications regarding loss and grief.**

Anyone involved in the grief experience is at a loss for a total explanation of what has just happened. Often at the time of death we all experience more questions than there are answers, often parents, educators and clergy are only able to share their abilities to listen and not provide detailed information.

**9. Children need to "get over" their grief and move on.**

The death of a loved one must be understood in the context of never getting over or moving on from this loss. The pain of the present will become more manageable at some point in time, but we will always experience parts of this pain for the rest of our lives. Telling this to a grieving child will comfort them rather than scare them. They will trust you and thank you for your honesty. A gentle reminder that we do not want to forget our loved ones but instead want to honor their presence in our lives forever.

**10. Children are better off not attending funerals.**

Children benefit from being included if they wish to participate. Asking the child what their preference is gives them some ability to take a situation that has careened out of control and place it back into their realm of oversight. They may indicate that they wish to attend only to find out later that they are not up to the rigors of the ceremony. Let them decide to change their minds. They have a personal relationship with the deceased and need to be given the option of attending each ritual. Being excluded only breeds anger and confusion.

*Adapted from Alan Wolfelt, author of "Helping Children Cope with Grief", 1983*