

When a Child Loses a Parent:

Dealing with children's grief

■ by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT



I'm not sure there is anything that pulls at the heartstrings more than watching a child's grief, especially when it's your own child. Understanding how children grieve a parent is difficult and knowing how to help them is even harder.

When my 3 year-old daughter lost her dad in a tragic accident, I struggled with understanding what to do and how to help her. Tony was a GREAT dad! He had two children - a son, Paul, from his first marriage and Sarah, our daughter. He loved his kids tremendously and played a very active role.

Tony worked swing-shift, and I worked straight days. Two out of three weeks, he took care of the kids while I worked. Every third week, when we worked the same shift, our daughter went to daycare. On one of those day shifts, when Sarah was not quite 3-1/2 years old, Tony dropped Sarah off at daycare with the promise he would pick her up later. She never saw him alive again.

The first year was the worst. First, how does one explain to a 3 year-old that her dad is dead? There is no concept of death - the closest Sarah had come was a goldfish or two! There were problems called "age regression," which means she reverted to an earlier age, in some ways to about 18 months old.

At Sarah's age, she was unable to talk about, or even understand, her grief. It came out in hitting. Me - a lot. And of course she would sob, and my heart would break. Questions about Dad and prayers asking God to tell him "hello" for her.... As she aged, questions about her Dad became fewer and more scattered. I remember when Sarah was 5, and asked me if her Dad had wanted to die. Her question startled me and I assured her absolute not! It was an accident! She paused, thinking, and then said, "Well, then what if you die? You wouldn't have a choice either." Ouch!

Just like adults, children's grief varies depending on external factors like: the relationship, how it happened, and how it affects daily life (e.g.: do we have to move?). Grieving will also depend on internal factors like: the developmental level, personality, and beliefs.

In general, children grieve in a way that resembles a roller-coaster. Thoughts and feelings are intense. God gave them this wonderful gift, however, that "shut-down" which automatically occurs when they become overwhelmed. Sobbing one minute - playing the next. As children age, the highs/lows become less abrupt and less intense in changes.

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Here are some ways you can help:

- Remember age regression is fairly normal. Please be patient and just love them where they are at.
- Remember that as they age, they will have to come to terms with new facets. My daughter is engaged and just started thinking about her wedding day - he can't walk her down the aisle or dance with her.
- Remember that life as they know it is gone, and along with it, the feeling of being safe and secure. Despite our own grief, we have to focus on helping our children feel as secure as possible.
- Practice loving your child in the way the child understands love. I highly recommend reading "The 5 Love Languages of Children" by Dr. Gary Chapman (there is also one specifically for teens), which will help you figure out how to reach each child in a way he/she will understand.
- Fit the level of what you say to the children's abilities to understand.
- Try to not give more information than they need. It is my personal belief that telling children "I don't know" to their questions can be very appropriate (when true).
- Be sure to have some wise counsel available. According to Proverbs there is wisdom in many counselors. Watching my daughter heal through counseling is one of the reasons why I myself have chosen a career in professional Christian counseling.
- Help your child to remember the parent in a way that is appropriate. This may mean putting together a photo album or a scrapbook of memories.

Above all else, pray! Pray for guidance! This is the best way to get through all of children's grief. God knows what your child will understand best, the best ways to comfort, what decisions can be made when.... In James 1:5, we are told to ask for wisdom when we lack it, and God will give it to us GENEROUSLY. God won't be mad at us for asking or for not knowing.

Parents usually question if they are handling situations and emotions in the right way. Parents are human and mess up to one degree or another. Please remember this: In God's love, He made a way so that we could be in relationship with Him despite our sins. As much as we love our children, God loves them even more. Do your best (which means getting God's guidance), and then trust God with the rest.

"If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him?" Matthew 7:11, NLT

"He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds." Psalm 147:3



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