

# Helping Your Child Battle the

# GRIEF - MONSTER

■ by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT

*I came to parenting the way most of us do — knowing nothing and trying to learn everything. ~ Mayim Bialik*

Children experience a living, breathing monster-in-the-room reality called grief. They feel its tangible presence.

My three-year-old pigtailed bundle of energy eagerly anticipated Daddy's promised pick-up from daycare. Her uncle arrived instead. She shook off her confusion, anticipating playtime. Once home, she experienced greater confusion. Daddy died; he never came home. Instead, a grief-monster jumped out of her closet. A long, intense battle ensued.

Each night, children expect parental superheroes to chase them away. We valiantly battle. I personally felt like "The Greatest American Hero," a 1970's teacher-turned-superhero learning how to use his new superhero suit. His antics—caused by the lost instruction booklet—brought laughter; my daughter's grief reactions brought confusion and pain. Emily Thorne said, "In the art of war, if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the approaching battles...."

Grief impacts our young children's security, faith, and self-confidence, and we help them heal using consistent love and respect.

## Superheroes know their enemy

Grief happens whenever change happens. Some degree of loss occurs whenever change occurs, even positive changes. For children, the coveted kindergarten beginning means losing play-time. Gaining their own bedroom requires losing their siblings' comforting nighttime presence. The home's new occupant, whether pet or sibling, brings both joy and less-focused parental attention.



The grief monster's size and strength vary greatly. We cannot know him by seeing him; he lives inside our children. We increasingly understand our children's grief as we understand its impact.

### Understanding grief's impact

Grief wields multiple weapons on multiple battlefronts.

- Too much confusion and not enough control battle self-confidence.
- Pain and fear challenge relational security.

Children's perceptions determine the weapon's strength; multiple factors created those perceptions. A few pre-existing factors include:

- Age and developmental levels,
- Autonomy and control levels,
- Relational security levels, and
- Change preparations.

We decrease the weapon's strength when we are:

- Present,
- Patient,
- Persistent, and
- Prioritizing their feelings and perspectives.

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## Superheroes know and use their superpower

Donning that superhero cape mandates developing and honing our superpowers. We call those superpowers “respect” and “love”. These help heal their damaged self-confidence and relational security.

### Self-confidence skills

Our respectful guidance, honesty, and trust combat our children’s faltering self-confidence. They increase healthy self-respect as we:

- Trust their mental capabilities, even when ignorance means they don’t yet know necessary information.
- Respect and model information-seeking when we lack necessary information, even when we desire their utmost admiration.
- Guide and teach without superior attitudes or criticism, even when they acted like an expert.
- Permit age-appropriate decision-making and limited control, even when it’s easier to do it ourselves.
- Give compassion and opportunities for do-overs, even when failure followed demanded autonomy.

### Relational-security skills

Strong grief can cause relational walls. We realize losses’ reality and fear the monster’s return. “If I let myself enjoy [---], I might lose [---], and next time I may never get over it. Our love’s consistent presence, guidance, and empathy battle insecurity. Kevin Heath said, “As your kids grow up they may forget what you said, but they won’t forget how you made them feel.” Actions and attitudes help our children feel more loved when:

- We consistently fulfill their needs, even when we must humble ourselves and seek assistance. This may include good counseling.
- We love them and want their presence, even when they expect rejection and act accordingly.
- We unconditionally accept them, even when they behave badly publicly.
- We show them our relationship isn’t an obligation or chore, even when they purposely irritate and exhaust us.

A side-note: unconditional, loving acceptance doesn’t discount discipline. Discipline means “to train,” and good parents provide loving behavior training and attitude adjustments.

### Faith-building skills



Grief impacts the way our children understand God’s character. Is He really good? Can He be trusted? Looking for answers by prioritizing prayer and scriptures helps children fight faith insecurities. Teach them God will:

- always be there with and for them (Isaiah 41:10, 43:1-4; John 14:16-19);
- provide wisdom we need when we need it (Proverbs 3:5-6; James 1:5);
- want their best (Jeremiah 29:11-13);
- understand their thoughts, feelings and problems (Psalm 139:1-18; Romans 8:27-37);
- love them *no matter what* (Romans 5:8; 1 John 3:22); and
- provide for their needs (Matthew 7:7-8, 11; Philippians 4:19).

Big or small changes trigger big wars or small skirmishes. They trigger so many questions! We hone our battle skills and train our children. We valiantly fight for and with our children as needed. We become exhausted, and it feels like the monster will never leave.

Can we do this? We can! Bob Marley shared: “You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have.” Through our consistent presence and honesty, our young children restore trust and self-esteem. We vanquish the grief-monster together.

\*Sometimes our children need additional healing support. The right counselor can help children and parents to feel less isolated and more capable to face parents’ and children’s specific battles. ■



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