



THE SEVEN “R”s

What Parents Should Know About Grieving Children and Teens

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Regression:

It's important to recognize that no matter how old your child is, you may see signs of regression. During this very stressful and painful time, when the security and safety of home has been momentarily disrupted, children may return to old ways of coping, thinking, expressing emotions, or retreating to a safer, simpler time.

Routines:

Regular routines can be extremely helpful in bringing some order, and with it a sense of safety and security, back into the life of the family. Maintaining regular schedules, eating nutritious meals at normal times and getting enough sleep may not make things better immediately, but it can keep children and adults healthier and better equipped to handle the difficult times.

Responsibilities:

It may take a grieving child or teen a little longer to accomplish daily tasks, but keeping up with these responsibilities can help rebuild self-esteem, which often erodes as a result of grief. Doing homework, helping in the kitchen and picking up their toys are important parts of daily life that serve to remind children that life continues on and with it come the responsibilities that each family member has to himself/herself and to the family.

Revisit:

At each new developmental stage, children and teenagers *may* revisit their loss and experience grief in new ways. Children, who had a parent die at an early age, may find themselves grieving again as their understanding of death and its finality matures. Children of all ages may revisit this loss throughout life when they celebrate milestones: becoming a teenager, starting high school, making a team, graduation, marriage and the birth of their own child. When parents know that this may happen, they are better prepared to anticipate and recognize the signs of grief and offer support and care.

Remembering:

It may be difficult for children to talk about the person who has died. They may feel that if they talk about him/her they will make others feel sad. Sometimes, when a parent has died, children worry about the well-being of their surviving parent and may be afraid they will lose them as well – either physically to death, or emotionally. And yet when that person who was such an important part of your life dies, and everyone stops talking about him/her, what is a child to think?

If I die, will I be forgotten, too? Parents need to take the lead in talking, remembering and expressing feelings – this is a critical time for children and teens and will serve as a model for grief throughout their lives.

Rituals:

Rituals are a wonderful way to remember and to include the person who has died into the fabric of family life. It's a reminder that something of who we are today is because we knew and loved this person and in this sense, and in many other ways, they are forever with us. Lighting candles, pictures placed in meaningful places, storytelling, visits to the person's favorite spots (hikes, lakes, ocean, museums, etc.) planting a tree or rosebush, or doing other things that honor our loved one's memory, reminds us that the person has died, but the relationship and all that once was continues on.

Resilience:

Children and teens are resilient. We are creatures who were made to live and thrive. With reassurance, love and care, your children will continue to heal and grow. You can empower them by letting them know that they are lovable, capable, cared for and that it's okay to have fun.

For more information, about the bereavement program at Hospicare, call Donna George at 607-272-0212 or e-mail dgeorge@hospicare.org