

Helping Children Prepare for the Death of a Loved One

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LISA CLARK: Thank you for joining us for this webcast. I'm Lisa Clark. When there is a death in the family, everyone takes an emotional hit. But the impact can be especially intense on children, who not only have to deal with the immediate loss of someone they love, but they are also vulnerable to many fears which may never occur to an adult. For the next few minutes we'll take a look at how you can help a child who has been devastated by loss, whether it is your own child or someone that you care about.

Joining our discussion this evening is Benjamin Cirlin. He is a clinical social worker and the executive director for the Center of Loss and Renewal in New York City. He is also the coordinator of bereavement services at Jacob Perlow Hospice of the Beth Israel Medical Center. Welcome, Benjamin. Also joining us is Patty Donovan-Duff. She is a registered nurse, and she is the director of the Bereavement Center of Westchester, where she has also done a lot of hospice care. Thank you so much for being with us as well, Patty.

I have a hypothetical question. If you are not a family member or not an immediate family member to a child who has experienced loss, and you see that their surviving parent is so overcome by grief-- or perhaps both of their parents, they've lost a grandparent-- that they are really not aware of or addressing the child's feelings, how is it appropriate to step in so it's not an overwhelming thing, to the parent or to the child, to help them start to tap into what their grief means?

PATTY DONOVAN-DUFF, RN: They say that there are two things for good grieving for children. One is a safe environment-- physical, emotional, psychological. The second is the presence of a caring adult other than maybe the real immediate family-- an aunt or an uncle, a coach, a teacher-- and the presence of that person in their life when they need to talk is very important for children. In our work with children, we will very often say, at the end of the eight weeks of the group, "Who's out there that you can talk to? Ask that person to be that special person." Adults don't know how to help children, very often. They don't know how. Sometimes we say to the kids, "Maybe you should go and pick a person and ask that person to be the person that you'll call when you're having a tough time, or you want to remember your mom or your dad or your grandmother." I think it's very important. I think the presence of adults in children's lives when they're grieving is very important.

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: One of the other important things that I like to suggest to people when they're in the presence of grieving people-- very often people say, "If there's anything I can do for you, give me a call." But grieving people have a hard time calling because they're so overwhelmed. It's much more helpful to say, "You know what? I see your lawn needs mowing. What do you say I come over on Saturday and I mow your lawn."

LISA CLARK: Do the practical things.

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: But to suggest it, and say, "I'm going to do it," rather than put the onus on the grieving person to ask for it.

LISA CLARK: Exactly so. I have one other question in the few moments that we have left. How can you help a child prepare for the inevitable comments that people will make, well-intentioned but perhaps insensitive -- "You're the man of the family now." "Life goes on." Those sorts of things which don't really take into account the real feelings that the child is having? How can you help a child prepare for hearing those kinds of things?

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: Not only are they not helpful, they're destructive. I believe in what I teach people I work with. I call it "griever's assertiveness." You need to prepare the kid and you need to teach him that someone's going to come along and say that, and you need to work with that child to say, "You know

what, I'm not the man of the family. I'm still a child." It's really about defending themselves against those kind of comments.

LISA CLARK: And giving themselves permission to feel what they're feeling and to express what they're feeling.

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: Absolutely.

PATTY DONOVAN-DUFF, RN: It's a wonder. I think we have so many teachable moments with children, to be able to teach them about loss of all kinds, and I think we really have to take advantage of those times with our kids to say to them even that sometimes adults don't know what to say. We're not good at this either. They know, and they'll tell.

LISA CLARK: Kids like hearing that or having you validate their strong suspicions. Well, I'd like to thank both of you, Benjamin and Patty, for being with us and for your insight into helping children grieve. It's a very important process for all of us, but especially, I think, for children, because they have to deal with this for their entire emotional lives. Thank you again. Thank all of you for joining us. I'm Lisa Clark.

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