

Catholic Parenting 101

Helping Children Cope with Loss

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Few things challenge parents like helping their children grieve in the face of a loss. In the wake of death, divorce, changed schools, or moving to a new neighborhood, a grieving child often sends confusing signals, leaving parents unclear and unsure about what to do. By keeping the following tips in mind, parents can help their children cope with loss.

TIP #1: Remember that children grieve differently than adults.

- ▶ Unlike many adults, children often express their grief in bursts of intense anger or sadness, sometimes lasting only minutes or hours, and then they return to feeling normal.
- ▶ Preschoolers often struggle with the permanence of loss. They need periodic reminders that the change (death, move to a new city, etc.) is permanent.
- ▶ Children might sometimes believe that they somehow caused the loss. They need regular and gentle reassurance that they are not responsible.
- ▶ Some grieving children say that they are feeling fine but then start having problems, such as difficulties sleeping, loss of appetite, body aches, school problems, and social problems. These children are demonstrating that they need more creative ways to express their feelings.

TIP #2: Help children to discover creative ways to express their feelings.

- ▶ Children rarely have the right words to express their pain. Instead, they express feelings through playing, drawing, painting, writing, or dancing. Invite younger children to point to where the sadness is in their bodies or draw pictures of their bodies, including where the feelings are.
- ▶ Find a grief support group in your community by checking with your parish, local hospice, or funeral home. Children often find it easier to work through their feelings with other children who are also going through the same experiences.
- ▶ Consider creating a memory box or scrapbook to help the child cherish favorite memories through pictures of the person who was lost.
- ▶ Anticipate anniversaries, holidays, and other triggers for pain. Even after months or years of healing, the pain of grief can erupt because of events that would otherwise involve the person who died. Children need permission to allow these seasons of grief.

TIP #3: Creatively bring the pain of loss to prayer.

- ▶ Help children to pray with their feelings. Consider having them tell or write their feelings to God. Remind them that Jesus is here with us to share in our grief and to comfort us.
- ▶ As children get older they can be encouraged to pray with their feelings during Mass. This can be a special time of feeling connected with Christ and those who have died.

TIP #4: Continue to parent and solve practical problems.

- ▶ Make an effort to stay connected with your child. Look for open moments to snuggle, read a book together, share a snack, and pray. Having you close by will help your child to heal.
- ▶ Continue to provide structure, discipline, and clear expectations. This can be more difficult than expected, as many parents are afraid to discipline grieving children for fear that they are too emotionally fragile to benefit from it. On the contrary, structure provides a sense of safety.

TIP #5: Be prepared to get professional counseling specialized for grieving children.

There are two situations that would warrant this.

- ▶ A child who continues to show signs of intense sadness or anger after several months; or
- ▶ A child who has never expressed any feelings of sadness or anger, even though more than six months have passed.

Helping children cope with loss can be confusing. However, we can also embrace seasons of loss as opportunities to create deeper human and spiritual connections.