

What to Say and Do

Since 1980, EveryStep's Amanda the Panda program has delivered love and caring through innovative services such as weekend grief camps, support groups, fun days, school visits and holiday support to inspire hope and healing after the death of a loved one. For more information, visit everystep.org
(515) 223-4847 | (877) 533-4847

WHAT NOT TO SAY

Don't ask: "How are you doing?" Ask: (be specific)

"How are you eating?"

"How are you sleeping?"

"How is _____ class going?"

"What are you doing for fun?"

"What helps right now?"

"What do you think about when you think of _____?"

Don't comment: "You shouldn't feel that way." Instead...

"Tell me how that feels."

Don't offer spiritual answers. Your beliefs may not be theirs.

"What do you believe?"

Don't minimize their pain meet them where they are...

"Right now it doesn't feel like it's going to get better."

Don't put a timetable on recovery... you can't fix this for them but you can be there

"I'll be here as long as you need me."

A child who is depressed / A child who is grieving...

- feels sadness mixed with anger, sometimes directed at himself / feels sadness but can switch to more normal moods in the same day
- may consistently feel tired, lose her appetite, or have trouble sleeping; may be hyperactive or aggressive (masking depression) / has changeable moods, activity levels, appetite and sleep patterns
- expresses anger in the form of rage or denies being angry altogether / expresses anger at appropriate times even if not in appropriate ways
- may not recall dreams, and fantasizes infrequently / dreams and fantasizes, particularly about the loss
- may see himself as bad and worthless; is preoccupied with himself / may blame himself for somehow not preventing the death, is preoccupied with the loss
- may be unresponsive to others or responds to pressure and urging / responds to warmth and reassurance
- is rarely able to enjoy pleasure / is able to experience pleasure at varying times

A grieving child, like a grieving adult, will experience some degree of depression. However, when the signs of depression seem to be prolonged, excessive, or destructive, or if there is a drastic change in behavior, it is important to seek professional help (from teachers, clergy, counselors, grief services, or doctors).

WHAT TO DO....

Pre K- Kindergarten

EXPECT: Withdrawal, denial, re-enactment play, heightened separation anxiety, whining, crying, clinging, tantrums, regression, fear of sleep

- Provide physical comforts: rest, holding, routine
- Assure adult protection and care
- Give repeated concrete explanations
- Encourage teacher/parent communication
- Enrich "feeling" vocabulary
- Incorporate play and play responses
- Explain physical reality of death

Elementary

EXPECT: Poor academic performance, fantasy play, obsessive talking about incident, anxious arousal, behavioral changes, peer problems, psychosomatic complaints, attention seeking

- Provide realistic information; address magical thinking
- Encourage appropriate acting out
- Continue to enrich feelings vocabulary
- Normalize feelings
- Reduce academic requirements
- Encourage verbal and creative expression
- Provide opportunities for age-appropriate tasks
- Provide opportunities for physical activity
- Provide opportunities to help others in need

Middle and High School

EXPECT: Acting out, self-criticism, fear of repetition of event/happening again, displaced anger, guilt, and withdrawal

- Normalize feelings and fears
- Encourage group discussion
- Reduce academic requirements
- Resume routine activities when possible
- Talk about relationship between acting out and the traumatic event
- Discuss safety measures
- Encourage physical activity
- Provide opportunities to connect to larger community

WHEN WORKING WITH GRIEVING CHILDREN - GENERALLY...

- Repeated listening to "the stories"
- VALIDATE feelings and responses!! - "a normal reaction to an abnormal situation"
- Give grounded grief education: "waves"
- Help prepare for unknowns: Funerals, rites and rituals, adult reactions
- Listen to questions and respond honestly
- Model your own feelings, reactions, coping
- Avoid euphemisms

Things That are Helpful to Say or Do

- Share favorite memories you have of our loved one or how they impacted your life. "The thing I'll remember the most about John was his contagious laugh." "Mary was my mentor and helped me in so many ways."
- A simple "I'm sorry." with a long hug or hand holding. Being comfortable with silence and just listening without commenting.
- Specific practical offers, rather than "call me if you need anything." Schedule a night to bring dinner, offer to bring over stamps and write a stack of thank you notes, mow the yard, or drive the kids to activities.
- Regular check-ins. "How did you survive today?" Especially on special occasions such as the anniversary of the death or their birthday. Send cards. The second year may be even harder than the first.
- Continued invitations to social gatherings, without any expectation to stay the entire event. Keep asking, even if the answer is often "Not today."

Things That are NOT Helpful to Say or Do

- Any religious cliché, especially if you don't share the same faith.
"You should be grateful they are not suffering, remember they are in a better place." "God never gives us more than we can handle."
- Unsolicited advice of any kind. "You should think of the good times." "Remember time will heal." "Be strong, kiddo, you're the man/woman of the house now."
- "I know just how you feel. When my father died, I blah, blah blah..."
- "You can have more children." or "At least you have your other children."
- Anything judgemental- "You should be moving on my now, it's been a year." "You go to the grave too much." "Don't feel guilty, angry, etc." "You need to talk about it more."
- Avoidance, especially if it was a suicide or homicide.

The truth is most of us have said the wrong thing to a grieving person at one time or another. It may help to remember that saying the perfect thing to a greiver doesn't have the magical power to take away their pain any more than saying the wrong thing will scar them forever. What people always remember is if we showed up and if we left them with a feeling of compassion.